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**ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING
IN HER LETTERS**

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Emery Walker Ph. Sc.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Rome 1858

*from the chalk drawing by Miss Fox
(afterwards Mrs E.F. Bridell-Fox)*

London: Smith Elder & Co. 15 Waterloo Place.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING IN HER LETTERS

By PERCY LUBBOCK

WITH A PORTRAIT

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PORTRAIT OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING. ROME, 1858.

*From the chalk drawing by Miss Fox (afterwards
MRS. E. F. BRIDELL-FOX).*

Frontispiece

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING IN HER LETTERS

I

HOPE END AND SIDMOUTH

1806-1835

THE final value of the broken, impetuous flame which Elizabeth Browning flung across our poetry, remains nearly fifty years after her death, still hardly decided. Much of her most characteristic work has lost its brightness for us ; much that was hailed with rapture two generations ago is quite unfamiliar now ; and though she tacitly holds her place among the great poets of the nineteenth century, it is in virtue of a certain residue of her writings, which appeal not only to the intimate sense of poetry and passion —this does not change—but also to the literary taste which changes so steadily. Our present standard in these matters is very different from Mrs. Browning's ; nearly all her work is full of offences against the modern canon. The central emotion is there, the oblivion of self, the rapt spirit ; only, and as we know deliberately, she refused to adopt the conventional grammar of art ; she chose to fling her poems straight from the fire of her imagination without softening

and weakening them, as she felt, by trimming their roughnesses and redundancies. She was not finally and instinctively an artist. She could speak of the spirit and the form of a poem, of its conception and execution, as separable things, in a way which indicates an obvious misunderstanding of the artistic aim. In these days, when the code of art is framed with more and more strictness, when writers are expected to reverence every aspect of their craft, this poet of the over-impulsive hand, the over-lavish profusion, has beyond doubt lost some of her magic. But it is extremely rash to condemn poetry for faults of taste, because language is always changing its associations, and what appears a tiresome uncouthness to one generation becomes a pleasing irregularity to another. If the central core of her passion burns with the true flame, her wild liberties with words may sooner or later seem no more than a refreshing irresponsibility.

But whatever her work may have lost since her day, her personality, her point of view, her eager worship before the shrine of poetry as she saw it, have become all the more interesting that they have of late years been made much more familiar. The intimate regions of her life were jealously guarded long after her death, in the mood, half tenderness, half a kind of defiance, which was so characteristic of her husband. But latterly it has been possible, without violation of just rights and delicacies, to reveal what could not be known before, to show something of that further side of the moon, in Browning's phrase, which was turned, not to the world, but to the few nearest her. With the publication of Mrs. Browning's letters, her shy, elusive, ardent presence became for the first time distinctly

visible. They are not brilliant letters ; they have not the special qualities of humour, of lightness of touch, of pungent individuality, that in certain hands make this accidental form of literature so charming. Their value is not that they reveal genius in themselves, but that through their perfectly unpretentious simplicity we see, as closely as can now be seen, the fragile woman and undaunted genius behind them. No one will read them for their literary merit. Their charm is that a personality of a singularly gracious and lovable kind moves through them, breathing no remote atmosphere, too rare for ordinary minds, but faced with familiar joys and sorrows, and responding with acute sensitiveness to both ; possessing the incalculable gift of genius, yet wearing no pontifical robes, arrogating no special immunities, a Vestal tending the flame in secluded places, but with no sacrifice of human ties and associations ; a gentle, affectionate, eager woman, whose emotions and interests were like those of a hundred others, only intensified by the fire that had touched her lips.

Genius is a flower that grows without sowing ; it breaks out unforeseen, like the snapdragon on a wall. Yet it seems on the whole to presuppose certain conditions in its environment, some strain of strong blood, some vividness of temperament. It has often been noticed that the mothers of these elect children have generally been women of deep feelings and marked individuality ; indeed, this seems to be the one fairly constant law in the matter. It is the stranger that the two women of fieriest genius that England produced in the nineteenth century, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett, should both have had pallid and ineffectual mothers,

who soon faded gently out of life, each somewhat scared (or that is the impression) by a forcible and despotic husband. Edward Moulton Barrett, no less than Patrick Brontë, was a man of a very singular order of mind, not remotely allied in its strange and obstinate obsessions to certain forms of insanity. At first sight it would be easy to dismiss him as a tyrannous egotist, not without a kind of nobility and fortitude, but hopelessly hardened in habits of inconsiderateness and self-will. He came of a line of West Indian slave-owners, and it has been suggested that inherited traditions may have had something to do with the submission which he demanded as an unquestioned right from all around him, especially from his sons and daughters. However that may be, his character was not one that can be summed up in a few trenchant words, and left condemned. He could not have been loved by Elizabeth as devotedly as he was, if he had not had, besides his personal integrity, some fatherly qualities of tenderness and affection. And as for his darker side, it is a too easy solution to call it mere selfishness ; it is juster to regard it as the sign of a deeply rooted psychological disease. It was not the facile selfishness that grows upon a man who loves himself and his habits. It was a principle to be jealously upheld through all difficulties ; a thing to suffer for, rather than a mere method of avoiding discomfort, like the ordinary egotist's indifference to another's point of view. He had too a deeply religious strain, though as may be supposed his was a religion of a sombre spirit, a shadow of doom rather than the spring of hope and happiness that his daughter's was to her. He had been bred and remained a non-conformist, and spiritual habits and practices were

an essential part of his daily life, not matters of established tradition and routine. In after-years, at his evening visits to his daughter as she lay on her sofa, he would kneel down before he left her, and pray fervently by her side.

He was scarcely twenty when in 1805 he married a lady of a Northumberland family, Mary Clarke Graham, who was several years his elder. He was already rich, having inherited from his maternal grandfather considerable estates in Jamaica ; and he at once proceeded to erect a large and fantastic house near Ledbury, in which to establish his household. But it was not yet ready for them, when on March 6, 1806, his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, was born at Coxhoe Hall, Durham, the house of one of his brothers. Two years later she was baptized, with the next baby, a son named Edward, in the neighbouring parish church of Kelloe.*

It was not till 1809 that the family moved to their new home at Hope End, in Herefordshire, the bizarre design of which, with oriental domes and minarets, presumably pleased Mr. Barrett's taste, and thus adds an unexpected element to his saturnine personality. But if the house was alien, the country-side in which Elizabeth first began to look round her, revealed to her once for all the very innermost spirit of tender English beauty,—limited and precise, but with an appeal that somehow moulds an English mind, even where more brilliant or more grandiose visions of loveliness claim allegiance. She left this quiet landscape as soon as she

* The discovery of the entry in the parish register of this church recently determined the doubt as to the date of her birth, which for long was thought to have taken place in 1809.

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reached maturity, and practically never saw it again ; in later life, as we know, she embraced the nobler, more passionate beauty of Italy with the eagerness of a spirit that drooped in the North. But she carried away certain delicate *genre* pictures of English scenery locked in her mind, to be reproduced years later with as much vividness as if she had never known another home :—

“ Such little hills, the sky
Can stoop to tenderly and the wheat-fields climb,
Such nooks of valleys, lined with orchises,
Fed full of noises by invisible streams ;
And open pastures, where you scarcely tell
White daisies from white dew,—at intervals
The mystic oaks and elm-trees standing out,
Self-poised upon their prodigy of shade,—
I thought my father’s land was worthy too
Of being my Shakespeare’s.”*

These lines are enough to prove how completely the beauty of England was part of Mrs. Browning’s mind, little as she saw of it, and little as she desired it in her later years of emancipation ; and it was at Hope End, with its smiling, comfortable landscape and its views of the Malvern Hills, that she gained this abiding possession.

The legend of her childhood is scanty, and chiefly to be constructed from her own poems. But it is not difficult to picture the small eager girl, the eldest of the rapidly growing family, as she flung herself with a child’s headlong zeal into the pleasures that stood ready for her ; flitting through the romantic woods that sheltered the house ; adoring her favourite brother and companion ; devoted to her father, who seems to have softened more

* “ Aurora Leigh,” Book I.

towards her than to the rest ; and suddenly finding in a book a door opening on a vision that filled her world. Somebody gave her Pope's translation of the "Iliad," and at once, with an ecstasy that coloured her whole life, she plunged into the world of Greece. Then it was that she carved her flower-bed into the shape of Hector, then that she sacrificed to Minerva, with the portentous solemnity of childhood. The gods and heroes became the most familiar of realities to her, though it must be admitted that they would have known themselves as little in the romantic glow which she flung over them, as in the stiff robes of Pope's rhetoric in which she found them. It was certainly an unpromising path by which to arrive at the life of Greece ; but perhaps a training in formalism, under which, like ghosts behind tapestry, stirred the fiery figures of the "Iliad," was not the worst that could have been devised for her. For like a thousand clever children before and since, she rushed at once into copious imitation of the model that had fired her imagination.

"*I* was precocious too," she wrote long years afterwards to Robert Browning, "and used to make rhymes over my bread and milk when I was nearly a baby . . . only really it was mere echo-verse, that of mine, and had nothing of mark or of indication, such as I do not doubt that yours had. I used to write of virtue with a large 'V,' and 'Oh Muse' with ■ harp, and things of that sort. At nine years old I wrote what I called 'an epic'—and at ten, various tragedies, French and English, which we used to act in the nursery. There was a French 'hexameter' tragedy on the subject of Regulus—but

I cannot even smile to think of it now, there are so many grave memories—which time has made grave—hung around it. How I remember sitting in ‘my house under the sideboard,’ in the dining-room, concocting one of the soliloquies beginning

“ ‘Que suis je ? autrefois un général Romain :
Maintenant esclave de Carthage je souffre en vain.’

“ Poor Regulus !—Can’t you conceive how fine it must have been altogether ? And these were my ‘maturer works,’ you are to understand, . . . and ‘the moon was bright at ten o’clock at night’ years before. As to the gods and goddesses, I believed in them all quite seriously, and reconciled them to Christianity, which I believed in too after a fashion, as some greater philosophers have done—and went out one day with my pinafore full of little sticks (and a match from the housemaid’s cupboard) to sacrifice to the blue-eyed Minerva who was my favourite goddess on the whole because she cared for Athens. As soon as I began to doubt about my goddesses, I fell into a vague sort of general scepticism, . . . and though I went on saying ‘the Lord’s Prayer’ at nights and mornings, and the ‘Bless all my kind friends’ afterwards, by the childish custom . . . yet I ended this liturgy with a supplication which I found in ‘King’s Memoirs’ and which took my fancy and met my general views exactly . . . ‘O God, if there be a God, save my soul if I have a soul.’ Perhaps the theology of many thoughtful children is scarcely more orthodox than this : but indeed it is wonderful to myself sometimes how I came to escape, on the whole, as well as I have done, considering the commonplaces of education in which I was

set, with strength and opportunity for breaking the bonds all round into liberty and licence. Papa used to say . . . ‘Don’t read Gibbon’s History—it’s not a proper book. Don’t read “Tom Jones”—and none of the books on *this* side, mind !’ So I was very obedient and never touched the books on *that* side, and only read instead Tom Paine’s ‘Age of Reason,’ and Voltaire’s ‘Philosophical Dictionary,’ and Hume’s ‘Essays,’ and Werther, and Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft . . . books, which I was never suspected of looking towards, and which were not ‘on *that* side’ certainly, but which did as well.”

Such was the most vivid side of her childhood, “a lonely life, growing green as the grass round it,” as she says elsewhere, expanding passionately towards her books and her heroes, but with few hands stretched out to her from the world of reality, her heart in her books and poetry, and her experience in reveries. “My sympathies drooped towards the ground like an untrained honeysuckle—and but for *one*, in my own house—but of this I cannot speak . . . Books and dreams were what I lived in—and domestic life only seemed to buzz gently round, like the bees about the grass.”

In this quiet unreal life one figure stood out clearly for her, though very dimly for us. This was her brother Edward, to whom she alludes in the extract just given. It was he who gave her the odd, pretty nickname of “Ba,” which clung to her all her life. He was two years younger than she, and on him she lavished the whole strength of her love. He alone gave her full sympathy and companionship ; her mother seems to have been somewhat pressed by

the cares of bringing into the world her huge family (she had eleven children); her father, fond as she was of him, obviously had not the gift of creating confidence and freedom in his strange relations with his children. To this brother she turned with a passion of affection that afterwards, at his death, brought her the darkest tragedy of her life. The absolute desolation of the world for her when she lost him shows how closely she had clung to him, as if he had been to her the only real thing in a world of pleasant shadows; and it is the more to be regretted that for us he remains the most intangible shadow of them all.

So the sweet, vague days slid by, and she began, not merely to luxuriate in the romance she had created for herself, but to pluck diligently at such fragments of classical instruction as came her way. A tutor of Edward's, who came to prepare him for Charterhouse, offered the first opportunity. Elizabeth much preferred her brother's lessons to her own. She joined him at his work, dashing first at Greek, as she says, and then at Latin as a help to Greek, tearing the meanings out of words, and riding lightly over the impediments of grammar, determined somehow or other to see her authors face to face.

At thirteen her literary zeal bore a well-developed fruit in an epic poem, four cantos long, called the "Battle of Marathon," which she tried to make as exactly like Pope's "Iliad" as she could contrive. The vehement little girl drew herself up to walk in the stately Augustan stride; and her father was so proud of her success that he had fifty copies printed (this was in 1820), and received a fine rhetorical dedication in return. The poem, with its conventional invocations and episodes, showed evidence at any rate of

extraordinary perseverance, as well as of a most unusual amount of reading ; and it deserved the kindness, which it has not received, of being allowed to perish with the fifty original copies.

Another step was achieved when she made the acquaintance, probably about this time, of the blind scholar, H. S. Boyd, who was then living at Malvern. He seems to have been a man of strong fantasies and prejudices, and he certainly led her an eccentric dance through Greek literature. But it is clear that she owed to him the facility which she gained in reading Greek, largely supplemented as it undoubtedly was by her own incessant labours. A very tender and picturesque relation sprang up between the two ; and a glimpse of the long quiet mornings, with the Malvern sheep-bells tinkling outside, as she read aloud from the farrago he provided for her, *Æschylus* to *Gregory Nazianzen*, sheds a soft light over the tortured phraseology of the famous “Wine of Cyprus ;” while the simplicity of it all frees the scene from the least touch of priggishness. Under this guidance she set still more furiously to work, and “read Greek,” she says, “as hard under the trees as some of your Oxonians in the Bodleian, gathered visions from the dramatists, and ate and drank Greek, and made my head ache with it.”

But all this time Mr. Boyd, while spiriting her as he did from one corner of Greek literature to another, did not give her a more catholic appreciation of English poetry. She remained faithful to the grand style, only adding Byron and Coleridge to Pope—“Childe Harold” and “Wallenstein,” it may be conjectured, rather than “Don Juan” and “Christabel.” The result appeared as a published volume in 1826,

“An Essay on Mind, and other Poems,” a very weighty production with a long and highly elaborate preface, only a very little less faithful to Pope than the “Battle of Marathon,” and revealing a still more astonishing range of reading, from Tacitus to Berkeley. The “Essay,” written in heroic couplets, ranges valiantly over poetry and philosophy, and with its solemnities, its commonplaces, its frigid and correct feeling, it is altogether a very naïve piece of work, and one which its author was not unnaturally anxious in later years to keep out of the way of critics. But though without definite promise, it does not entirely lack an echo here and there of her own voice, suggesting possibilities for the time when she should have escaped “from trammels and Popes,” as she put it.

She was now nearly a woman, and a very one-sided training she had received, partly premature, partly incomplete. In her ample, opulent home she had seen little enough of the world. Except for her father and her favourite brother, it does not appear that her family formed more than a harmonious background to life. Her sisters were younger than she, and the help and sympathy she afterwards found in them must belong altogether to later years. We hear of a few country neighbours, one or two of whom remained lifelong friends; but it is clear that there was very little of the nature of society at Hope End. Yet she saw enough of English county life in these years, to be able later to criticize it with considerable pertinence, if not enough to make her view it more indulgently.

“Do you know at all what English country life is,” she writes, in 1845, “which the English praise so, and ‘moralize

upon into a thousand similes,' as that one greatest, purest, noblest thing in the world—the purely English and excellent thing? It is to my mind simply and purely abominable, and I would rather live in a street than be forced to live it out,—that English country life; for I don't mean life in the country. The social exigencies—why, nothing *can* be so bad—nothing! That is the way by which Englishmen grow up to top the world in their peculiar line of respectable absurdities.

"Think of my talking so as if I could be vexed with any one of them! *I!*—On the contrary I wish them all a happy new year to abuse one another, or visit each of them his nearest neighbour whom he hates, three times a week, because 'the distance is so convenient,' and give great dinners in noble rivalry (venison from the Lord Lieutenant against turbot from London!) and talk popularity and game-law by turns to the tenantry, and beat down tithes to the rector. This glorious England of ours; with its peculiar glory of the rural districts!"

For all her inexperience her insight had its shrewdness. There is a residue of justice in this tirade which can only have been learnt in early days at Hope End.

Though she was not of those who pine in the city for the sight of green fields, she had a simple and quite unmystical joy in the presence of wood and meadow. She lived familiarly in the open air in her girlhood; and while her feeling for natural things was hardly a passion, yet she knew them well, and carried the remembrance through the long seclusion in her London hermitage. As for her health, it seems to have given no uneasiness in her

childhood ; yet there must have been some innate delicacy, for by the time she was a woman it is evident that signs of decline had set in. We hear vaguely of a fall from a horse and a serious illness when she was fifteen ; though details are conflicting, it is certain that her strength began to fail as she grew up, and that she became recognized as the fragile one of the family, to be shielded and guarded by the rest.

In 1828 the mother of so many children, the vague anxious figure we discern so faintly, slipped quietly out of a life that does not seem to have brought her any very vivid pleasure.

"Scarcely was I a woman when I lost my mother," wrote Elizabeth in 1846 ; "dearest as she was, and very tender and of a nature harrowed up into some furrows by the pressure of circumstances : for we lost more in her than she lost in life, my dear dearest mother. A sweet gentle nature, which the thunder a little turned from its sweetness —as when it turns milk. One of those women who can never resist ; but in submitting and bowing themselves, make a mark, a plait, within,—a sign of suffering. Too womanly she was—it was her only fault."

It was just before her mother's death that the series of Elizabeth's published letters begins, with a little note, giving details of Mrs. Barrett's illness, to a neighbour, Mrs. Martin, a lifelong and much-valued friend. Rather ornate, rather stilted, rather constrained in phraseology these early letters seem now, as if her literary training weighed upon her even when she wrote to her friends. And as the time at Hope End was now nearly over, they give no more than

a glimpse of the life there. That sweet, dreamy chapter in her existence is to be read only in her poems and in a few later letters of reminiscence, such as those which have already been quoted.

It was in 1832 that they said good-bye to the great grotesque house with its Turkish minarets and its enchanted garden ; and Elizabeth never saw the Malvern hills again. It is only a heart of considerable fortitude that can bear in after-life to summon up the ghosts of such memories ; and Elizabeth, much as she dreamed and wrote of Hope End, felt she could never bear to go there again.

Mr. Barrett, whether or no his fortunes were affected by the prospective abolition of West Indian slavery, desired a smaller establishment ; and a home overlooking the sea was found at Sidmouth in Devonshire. Their tenure of it was quite uncertain at first, and though they finally spent three years there, it was altogether an unsettled time ; Mr. Barrett's great handful of children never knew from one week to another whether the mandate would not be issued, planting them suddenly in another corner of the kingdom.

“ What we shall do ultimately,” writes Elizabeth, “ I do not even dream ; and if I know papa, *he* does not. My visions of the future are confined to ‘ what shall I write or read next ? ’ and ‘ when shall we next go out in the boat ? ’ and *they*, you know, can do no harm to anybody.”

But it was in many ways a blissful time. Elizabeth's health, though evidently uncertain, kept her in no sense a prisoner, and she joined happily in walking and donkey-riding and boating with her brothers and sisters. It is during this time that these latter begin to take definite

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form. Her two sisters (another had died in infancy) were now growing up : Henrietta, gay and sociable, Arabel, of less obvious attractions, self-contained and shy, but of deep sympathy and inexhaustible charity,—the stronger character of the two, it seems, and perhaps the best beloved by Elizabeth, who cherished them both, however, with the deepest devotion.

Happy as the brothers and sisters were together, it must have been an anxious time for their father.

"Of course you know," writes Elizabeth in September, 1833, "that the late Bill has ruined the West Indians. That is settled. The consternation here is very great. Nevertheless I am glad, and always shall be, that the negroes are—virtually—free!"

The thought that all the comfort in which she had been bred was tainted with the "cursed blood of slaves" was often a bitter one to her, though possibly not so much as one might expect from her lyrical love of freedom and denunciations of tyranny. But the really surprising thing is that she felt the horror of it at all. Money has an everlasting gift of softening the ugliness of the special form of injustice on which it relies ; and Elizabeth was probably brought up to a most rosy view of slavery. It argues a considerable independence of family tradition that it ever occurred to her to welcome the freedom of the negroes.

The abolition of slavery did not mean ruin at any rate for her father, though it did mean a considerable diminution in his means. To be rich after being very rich has

often proved a trial difficult to bear with dignity and fortitude, and Mr. Barrett undoubtedly showed both.

By this time it had become quite clear that Elizabeth's devotion to poetry had at least the quality of endurance. There is a real beauty in the spirit of faith and deliberation with which she prepared herself for the calling of a poet. Poetry was to be her life's work. It was not to be merely a pleasant adornment to life, a beautiful object to be taken out at intervals and put away again. It was to be an integral part of her existence, a sacred mission, demanding perpetual industry and enthusiasm. Moreover, though she had as yet written nothing showing unusual promise, she seems to have been harassed by no doubt on the subject. She was under no illusion ; she felt the possibility of failure ; she was conscious of her smallness, her inadequacy, as she stood before the mysterious shrine. But of her vocation, her duty to consecrate her life to the august service, of this she seems never to have had a moment's misgiving. Perhaps a little less solemnity would have done her poetry no harm, but the sight has its impressiveness for all that.

And so with perfect simplicity she now came forward with a new and decidedly forbidding volume. In 1833 she offered the world a very bald and stiff translation of the *Prometheus Vinctus*, to the back of which she bound a handful of short and rather tame little poems. This austere production was not likely to attract much attention, but no doubt it had its share in starting the piquant rumours of Miss Barrett's erudition, of her familiarity with crabbed texts, that hung round her name as soon as it began to be known. As for this version of Æschylus's

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lofty drama of self-sacrifice and expiation, no one could be severer on it than its author was not long afterwards. She even went so far as to take the step which of all others taxes a writer's most determined efforts—that of reviving and recasting old work. Not content with capturing all the available copies and locking them up in her father's cupboard, she set to work some ten years later to re-translate the whole play ; and then, and only then, felt that she would have an answer for the ghost of *Æschylus*, when it appeared reproachfully at her bedside.

But incessantly as she worked, and though she certainly covered an enormous amount of ground in her reading, and threw her own enthusiastic enjoyment over it all, she never became a scholar, either in the meticulous sense of the grammarian and philologist, or in the wider sense of the man who makes the Greek spirit his own, and moves naturally in its equal radiance. She did not pretend to exactness in the science of language ; but in a far more essential way than that she missed the meaning of her beloved authors. She never understood that deliberate aim at attainable perfection, which is at the heart of Greek literature. Hers was the romantic temper, never content with attainment, which spends its life in pursuing a vanishing shadow ; and her classical allusions, of which she is lavish in her earlier letters, seldom ring true.

However, it is better to misunderstand with enthusiasm than to misunderstand with indifference, and the Greek authors at any rate are more familiar with the latter method. Elizabeth Barrett, with her romantic, barbarian zeal, gave and received her reward.

Thus among busy days, with familiar voices all around,

this free and whole-hearted life reaches its maturity. And here, just when the world seems to be enlarging before it, the shadow begins to fall. The country is left behind, health fails, and very soon the whole fabric of existence is rent by a devastating tragedy. From now till the time, ten years later, when beyond hope and belief a new light broke on her, we follow a life painted in colours as dim as the London skies which shrouded it ; yet with a burning heart under it all, like the sun which struggles and peers through the fog.

II

LONDON AND TORQUAY

1835-1841

IN 1835 the Sidmouth house, with its windows looking over summer seas, was abandoned at last, and the family were once for all transplanted to London.

"You see we are in London after all, and poor Sidmouth left afar. I am almost inclined to say 'poor us' instead of 'poor Sidmouth.' But I dare say I shall soon be able to see in my dungeon, and begin to be amused with the spiders. Half my soul, in the mean time, seems to have stayed behind on the sea-shore, which I love more than ever now that I cannot walk on it in the body. London is wrapped up like a mummy, in a yellow mist, so closely that I have had scarcely a glimpse of its countenance since we came. Well, I am trying to like it all very much, and I dare say that in time I may change my taste and my senses—and succeed. We are in a house large enough to hold us, for four months, at the end of which time, if the experiment of our being able to live in London succeed, I believe that papa's intention is to take an unfurnished house and have his furniture from Ledbury. You may wonder at me, but I wish that were settled *so*, and *now*. I am satisfied with London, although I cannot enjoy it. We

are not likely, in the case of leaving it, to return to Devonshire, and I should look with weary eyes to another strangership and pilgrimage even among green fields that know not these fogs. Papa's object in settling here refers to my brothers. George will probably enter as a barrister student at the Inner Temple on the fifth or sixth of this month, and he will have the advantage of his home by our remaining where we are. Another advantage of London is, that we shall see here those whom we might see nowhere else."

The house first taken (74, Gloucester Place) was regarded merely as a temporary refuge ; but it was in fact three years before the head of the family selected another, in which his children might be allowed to strike root. The chief reason for the move to London appears to have been to provide a home for the sons, who were growing up and embarking on their professions. But Mr. Barrett must also have wished to keep in closer touch with his affairs than before. Though it is difficult to make out the precise nature of these, the fact remained that hitherto he had lived far out of reach of London, and that from this point he spent long hours daily in the City. And it is from this point, too, that his patriarchal ideas of the position of a father become prominent. His family were well used to them, no doubt ; but to onlookers there must have been at least a certain quaintness in the sight of this large household of professional men, all quartered under a single roof, and under a single pair of vigilant eyes, which kept so jealous a watch that not one of the family was even allowed to invite a friend to dinner. Mr. Barrett never extended

open recognition to his children's friends. And yet certain freedoms were permitted under this extraordinary despotism. It was as though Mr. Barrett would allow anything so long as he was not forced to see it. His daughters might have their guests so long as it was clearly understood that they were not his guests too. Even this privilege, however, was no mark of indulgence. It was rather the result of an immovable conviction that not one of his family could really be capable of controverting his will in any matter of importance. The tragic surprises with which this conviction finally faced him will appear before long. It is enough now to note the beginning of the obsession on the part of the head of the household that his authority was still absolute and unquestioned, although his children were becoming men and women; while at the same time he grew less and less capable of showing them the real devotion that underlay his tyranny. No doubt, too, that stream of love did really begin to grow weaker. A love which makes no allowances, which never realizes that its object has a life and development of its own, becomes at last no more than a habit, a thing to be taken for granted; it ceases to be anything vital; and Mr. Barrett's conception of a father's position, though it may have begun in a certain jealous affection, ended in no more than an exaggerated and abnormal form of selfishness.

Thus at the age of twenty-nine Elizabeth Barrett saw London for the first time, and here at last we find her surrounded by more or less tangible presences. She now came into contact with people who have an independent existence of their own for a later generation, shadowy names as some of them are. All of them, at any rate,

had a footing among the reputations of their time, even if many have only a parasitical existence now, figuring in literary memoirs as the friends of the few whose fame has proved to be durable. It is these obscurer memories, however, who must help us to picture the comfortable little circle of London cultivated life at that time—the few really commanding figures do not fit into it ; their own identity is too pronounced to merge harmoniously into this happy little world, even if, like Wordsworth, like Carlyle, they had not held away from it. But such diverse names as Richard Hengist Horne, Chorley, Serjeant Talfourd, give the atmosphere at once. The life and taste represented by these memories is remote enough now to have a seductive quaintness. Their epoch-making tragedies and romances have left nothing but a pleasant flavour of strange old *rococo* enthusiasms and ideals. At this distance of time we need hardly be ashamed of watching it all with frank amusement ; and indeed it would be difficult to take their unsuspecting rhetoric in any other spirit. The mediocre of our own day will in their turn serve the mirth of the future. But then, as now, it will be an affectionate mirth, because the evocation of the past must necessarily touch a more tender chord than the mere sense of the ridiculous ; and I do not think that we shall writhe in our graves at the sound of it. We need not, therefore, be ashamed of smiling over the cheerful comfort and orderliness of the literary Bohemia of London seventy years ago. A very civilized Bohemia indeed ! As always since the days when talent was first given a social standing of its own, it was largely peopled with amateurs. The result of raising the material life and dignity of the artistic world

seems to be a danger of lowering the standard of its art. The rich patron and the indigent literary parasite seem to imply a state of affairs in which the flame of art probably burns more brilliantly. When the patron sinks his superiority, and sits with the writer instead of keeping him well below the salt, an element of mediocrity seems to be necessarily introduced. The rigid sumptuary laws, which were a necessity in the old Bohemia, become relaxed. The spirit of art, which before was not only a glory and a wonder, but often enough had to be meat and drink as well, is somehow reduced to the position of an ornament, a charming pursuit ; its consuming intensity is lost.

This, however, is a longer preamble than is perhaps required, before introducing the most genial and generous and encouraging of amateurs, John Kenyon, the elegant writer of heroic couplets, and what was infinitely more, the lavish host and untiring friend of half the men of note from Coleridge to Robert Browning. He was a man whose pure goodness and sympathy amounted to genius. He was a conversationalist, a *bon viveur*, "*sorte de Mécène bon enfant*," as Mlle. Merlette says ; his appearance has been described as that of "an idealized Pickwick." But his real distinction was the flood of light which his warm, generous heart spread round him wherever he went. He had inherited considerable wealth from a double line of West Indian sugar-planters. At the time of which we are speaking he was a widower of fifty, settled in London—an ubiquitous diner-out and a confirmed dilettante. But the futility of his production is redeemed by his sheer goodness ; and more than that, his goodness had an additional zest in a certain princeliness of nature, which makes him

not merely an amiable, but also a stately figure. He was a distant cousin of the Barretts, and very soon after their arrival in London an affectionate intimacy began between him and Elizabeth, as between an indulgent uncle and a promising niece, which lasted until his death twenty years later. It was through him that she first touched the outer world. In those early years at Gloucester Place she found herself now and then, through his agency, in the midst of the literary society which he irradiated. With an enthusiasm which yet always preserved independence and a saving touch of irony, she watched the larger fishes that occasionally appeared in these well-appointed vivaries.

"No, I was not at all disappointed in Wordsworth," she writes, after one such glimpse, "although perhaps I should not have singled him from the multitude as a great man. There is a *reserve* even in his countenance, which does not lighten as Landor's does, whom I saw the same evening. His eyes have more meekness than brilliancy; and in his slow even articulation there is rather the solemnity and calmness of *truth* itself, than the animation and energy of those who seek for it. As to my being quite at ease when I spoke to him, why how could you ask such a question? I trembled both in my soul and body. But he was very kind, and sate near me, and talked to me as long as he was in the room—and recited a translation by Cary of a sonnet of Dante's—and altogether, it was quite a dream! Landor too—Walter Savage Landor . . . in whose hands the ashes of antiquity burn again—gave me two Greek epigrams he had lately written . . . and talked brilliantly and prominently until Bro (he and I

went together) abused him for *ambitious* singularity and affectation. But it was very interesting. And dear Miss Mitford too ! and Mr. Raymond, a great Hebraist and the ancient author of ‘A Cure for a Heartache !’ I never walked in the skies before ; and perhaps never shall again, when so many stars are out !”

It must have been a surprising enough discovery for her to find that she moved among these luminaries with a very decided light of her own. A vague reputation clung round her already as a poetess of talent and learning. Her acquaintance was sought ; she was “asked out.” Wordsworth wished to see her again when he was next in London. But her letters may be searched in vain, not merely for the smallest trace that her vanity was pleased, but for any indication that she did other than put this part of her reception gently aside. Though the door was at once thrown open to her, she hardly entered it. Her father does not seem to have held the slightest intercourse with any side of the social world ; they lived altogether in a world of their own, and Elizabeth’s excursions outside it were very few. After two years of London her old friend Mrs. Martin supposes that her friends and acquaintances must have greatly multiplied.

“The truth is,” she answers, “that I have almost none at all in this place ; and, except our relative, Mr. Kenyon, not one literary in any sense. Dear Miss Mitford, one of the very kindest of human beings, lies buried in geraniums, thirty miles away. I could not conceive what Henrietta had been telling you, or what you meant, for a long time—until we conjectured that it must have been something

about Lady Dacre, who kindly sent me her book, and intimated that she would be glad to receive me at her conversations—and you know me better than to doubt whether I would go or not. There was an equal unworthiness and unwillingness towards the honor of it. Indeed, dearest Mrs. Martin, it is almost surprising how we contrive to be as dull in London as in Devonshire—perhaps more so, for the sight of a multitude induces a sense of seclusion which one has not without it ; and, besides, there were at Sidmouth many more known faces and listened-to voices than we see and hear in this place. No house yet ! And you will scarcely have patience to read that papa has seen and likes another house in Devonshire Place, and that he *may* take it, and we *may* be settled in it, before the year closes. I myself think of the whole business indifferently. My thoughts have turned so long on the subject of houses, that the pivot is broken—and now they won't turn any more. All that remains is, a sort of consciousness, that we should be more comfortable in a house with cleaner carpets, and taken for rather longer than a week at a time. Perhaps, after all, we are quite as well *sur le tapis* as it is. It is a thousand to one but that the feeling of four red London walls closing around us for seven, eleven, or twenty-five years, would be a harsh and hard one, and make us cry wistfully to ‘get out.’ I am sure you will look up to your mountains, and down to your lakes, and enter into this conjecture.

“ Talking of mountains and lakes is itself a trying thing to us poor prisoners. Papa has talked several times of taking us into the country for two months this summer, and we have dreamt of it a hundred times in addition ;

but, after all, we are not likely to go, I dare say. It would have been very delightful—and who knows what may take place next summer? We may not absolutely *die*, without seeing a tree."

The result of this withdrawal, partly voluntary, partly no doubt necessitated by her health, from the circle which was so ready for her, was of course to throw her more than ever upon herself and her own resources. Such sympathy in literary matters as she found in her own family was more affectionate than intelligent. She wrote to satisfy her enthusiasm, and she set her own standard for her writing. Her seclusion strengthened her native independence, and kept her aloof from the pressure of the current laws of taste and criticism. She lost by this, no doubt, because her instinct for self-castigation in her writing, though strong in its way, took a perverted course, and led her into allowing extravagances in her work, from which a little more contact with the taste of plain and mediocre writers might have saved her. But she probably gained far more by the freedom from cross-influences, which enabled her to keep her eye single, and to write without regarding the effect of what she wrote on Chorley's taste or Horne's sense of appropriate language. She guarded her shrine, in fact, in the middle of a crowd of people all eager to show her how to regulate the fire and the incense. It was far easier for her to do this in the entrenchment of her own armchair, where she sat and "received" the magnificent Kenyon, than it would have been if she had mixed freely with the magnificent Kenyon's innumerable guests.

One old tie was, however, continued for some while in London without reserve. Her eccentric, despotic old friend, Mr. Boyd, was now settled in St. John's Wood. He loved her as ever, and, as ever, tried affectionately to bully her in literary matters. And she, with delightful deference, followed where he led, but still with her eyes open, quietly and independently forming her own judgments, ready always with her own reasons for her own opinions. He took a fatherly interest in her writings, and for a time was her chief literary confidant. They correspond about the poems which she begins to contribute now and then to certain periodicals. These seldom appear to satisfy him, but she accepts his strictures with a very pleasant fusion of modesty and firmness. The charge of obscurity she could not always deny, but she could and did deny warmly that it was due to deliberate perversity on her part. She writes in June, 1838, to Miss Mitford—

"As to the ballad, dearest Miss Mitford, which you and Mr. Kenyon are indulgent enough to like, remember that he passed his criticism over it—before it went to you—and so if you did not find as many obscurities as he did in it, the reason is—*his* merit and not mine. But don't believe him—no!—don't believe even Mr. Kenyon—whenever he says that I am *perversely* obscure. Unfortunately obscure, not *perversely*—that is quite a wrong word. And the last time he used it to me (and then, I assure you, another word still worse was with it) I begged him to confine them for the future to his jesting moods. Because, *indeed*, I am not in the very least degree perverse in this fault of mine, which is my destiny rather than my choice, and comes

upon me, I think, just where I would eschew it most. So little has perversity to do with its occurrence, that my fear of it makes me sometimes feel quite nervous and thought-tied in composition. . . .”

This quotation illustrates another charm in her attitude towards her own writing. To answer criticisms naturally, without embarrassment, without nervous effusion, is one of the last graces given to an inexperienced writer. Elizabeth Barrett, as we know, had an almost religious reverence for her art ; but there is not the smallest touch of pomposness about it. She can speak of her writing as simply as she might have spoken of her needlework, if she had had any. It is an attitude which women seem to find easier to preserve towards their work than do men, partly, no doubt, because to a woman art is a more detachable thing than to a man ; it is not often to her the sharp concentrated flame into which all the materials of life must be cast, that it is to the male artist. With Miss Barrett, as with Charlotte Brontë or Christina Rossetti, the flame did indeed burn at the very heart of things ; and yet, like them, she managed to stand away from it too, and to talk of the fused, fashioned work that came out of it, as a thing apart from herself. She had no false shame about it ; she neither shrank from discussing it, nor did she thrust it feverishly forward in the expectation that it must be of overpowering interest to every one who could be brought to look at it. Not many enthusiastic writers have avoided both these maladies of inexperience as did Miss Barrett. It is agreeable to notice that Robert Browning was another.

The last quotation is also notable as an early appearance

upon our scene of a very faithful and individual friend. Mr. Kenyon, among his thousand other good offices, had brought about a happy acquaintance between his young cousin and Miss Mary Russell Mitford. The only direct link that still survives between this lady and the present generation is the series of delicate little *genre* sketches, published in 1824, which she called "Our Village." But Miss Mitford herself regarded this book as one of the most trivial of her portentous series of productions. By the usual irony of fate, she has been compelled to drop her valued poems and tragedies and novels, and alone to retain the modest little volume which attracted great attention when it appeared, and has kept some measure of it ever since. She was a little, sedate, bright-eyed lady of middle age when Miss Barrett first knew her, living at Reading with a feeble and worthless old father, whom she loved tenderly and supported by her literary earnings. Capable and equable as she was, her young friend's soft, half childlike charm, her vividness and fragility, appealed deeply to her. The little account of their acquaintance which Miss Mitford included in her "Recollections of a Literary Life" cannot be omitted here, often as it has been quoted—

"My first acquaintance with Elizabeth Barrett commenced about fifteen years ago. She was certainly one of the most interesting persons that I had ever seen. Everybody who then saw her said the same; so that it is not merely the impression of my partiality or my enthusiasm. Of a slight, delicate figure, with a shower of dark curls falling on either side of a most expressive face, large tender eyes, richly fringed by dark eyelashes, a smile like a sunbeam,

and such a look of youthfulness that I had some difficulty in persuading a friend, in whose carriage we went together to Chiswick, that the translatress of the ‘Prometheus’ of *Æschylus*, the authoress of the ‘Essay on Mind,’ was old enough to be introduced into company, in technical language, was ‘out.’ Through the kindness of another invaluable friend, to whom I owe many obligations, but none so great as this, I saw much of her during my stay in town. We met so constantly and so familiarly that, in spite of the difference of age, intimacy ripened into friendship, and after my return into the country we corresponded freely and frequently, her letters being just what letters ought to be—her own talk put upon paper.”

Miss Barrett, on her side, became much devoted to this good friend, who made constant excursions from Reading on purpose to see her; and the picture suggested by their long conversations in the quiet London room is made all the more piquant by their very unlikeness—the shy, frail little creature with her burning soul and gentle ways, and the trim, genial woman, so full of sense and courage and vigorous talk. Miss Barrett writes (January, 1837) of the other’s literary work with fine discrimination—

“ [Miss Mitford] wrote to me not long ago to say that she would soon be in London with *Otto*, her new tragedy, which was written at Mr. Forrest’s own request, he in the most flattering manner having applied to her a stranger, as the authoress of *Rienzi*, for a dramatic work worthy of his acting—after rejecting many plays offered to him, and among them Mr. Knowles’s. . . . She says that her play will be quite opposed, in its execution, to *Ion*, as unlike

it ‘as a ruined castle overhanging the Rhine, to a Grecian temple.’ And I do not doubt that it will be full of ability ; although my own opinion is that she stands higher as the authoress of ‘Our Village’ than of *Rienzi*, and writes prose better than poetry, and transcends rather in Dutch minuteness and high finishing than in Italian ideality and passion.”

Meanwhile the big family were still living, under their father’s autocratic rule, in the temporary house in Gloucester Place, highly unsettled, but resigned to their despot’s familiar inability to find a fixed abode that suited him. Indeed, their resignation was wonderful, for Mr. Barrett’s idea of living in London appears to have been never to stir out of it ; and though there were occasional rumours of a house in the country for August and September, nothing ever came of them. The whole of the long, empty summer was spent year after year in that blank neighbourhood of Portman Square, though of course there were country lanes and hedgerows then to be found within a measurable distance. The well-loved brothers seem to have been settling gradually to their occupations. Now and then one or another is so daring as to go abroad —a terrific event, sometimes almost amounting to a breach of discipline, which makes the whole household vibrate. As for Mr. Barrett, he apparently stays severely at his post, and regards these signs of independence with disfavour.

Elizabeth meanwhile, without any definite illness, grew gradually weaker and more incapable of taking part in any occupations outside the house ; while at the same time her own especial work—the little slips of paper on which she

wrote and which she put away so meekly whenever interrupted—progressed peacefully and steadily. She tasted the joy, not merely of expression—she had had that as long as she could remember—but of finding her real voice ; and she began to make tentative advances, readily accepted, towards several of the literary magazines and newspapers of best repute.

So we reach the year 1838, which is marked by two events. In the first place Mr. Barrett at last discovered a house to his mind, 50, Wimpole Street, where his patient family could be allowed to establish themselves among their own belongings. The second event was the publication of a new volume of poems, "*The Seraphim*," which marks Elizabeth Barrett's first appearance as a writer of real originality and distinction. She never regarded her earlier volumes as any genuine expression of herself, as indeed they were not. In the "*Essay on Mind*" and the rest she had wrapped herself in fine old singing-robés enough, but they were openly borrowed, and moreover they were ideally unsuited to the free, irregular motions that were natural to her. In the new volume she was at any rate herself. Rather diffuse and awkward these poems seem now, confused in their thought and inexact in expression, staggering on impossible rhymes and uncertain grammar. But the immature grace, like a child's, the romance, the grave loftiness of emotion in such poems as "*The Deserted Garden*" and "*Cowper's Grave*," these are her own, and they won the volume a certain amount of popular recognition. The critics were on the whole discriminating enough. They did not fail to see that the book contained signs of a very unusual power ; and at the

same time they blamed her strained, eclectic use of language, though they were divided as to whether this was an elaborate mannerism or simply a mark of carelessness. The classical Mr. Boyd, indeed, and the polished Mr. Kenyon told her, not very perspicuously, that she took no pains. Indeed, criticism of her work tended generally to concentrate itself upon her style, which was a misfortune in a way. It obscured the real point, which was that her thought needed clarifying first. She was not careless; indeed, she was, if anything, too full of theories about rhymes and metres; and apparently neither she nor Mr. Kenyon saw that her first need was concentration, a clearer idea of what she had to say; the clearer way of saying it would then follow naturally.

In the year 1838, too, her health began to give real alarm. Writing on June 21 to Mr. Boyd, she says—

“I am better a great deal than I was last week, and have been allowed by Dr. Chambers to come downstairs again, and occupy my old place on the sofa. My health remains, however, in what I cannot help considering myself, and in what, I *believe*, Dr. Chambers considers, a very precarious state, and my weakness increases, of course, under the remedies which successive attacks render necessary. Dr. Chambers deserves my confidence—and besides the skill with which he has met the different modifications of the complaint, I am grateful to him for a feeling and a sympathy which are certainly rare in such of his profession as have their attention diverted, as his must be, by an immense practice, to fifty objects in a day. But notwithstanding all, one breath of the east wind undoes whatever

he labours to do. It is well to look up and remember that in the eternal reality these second causes are no causes at all."

From this point she began definitely to lead the life of an invalid. There was no inherent disease, but her physical and nervous sensitiveness was so acute that she was defenceless against the small risks and asperities of normal life ; and what kept her continually at the lowest ebb of her strength was that her double weakness demanded incompatible treatment.

"One lung is very slightly affected," she wrote later, "but the nervous system *absolutely shattered*, as the state of the pulse proves. I am in the habit of taking forty drops of laudanum a day, and *cannot do with less*, that is, the medical man *told me* that I could not do with less, saying so with his hand on the pulse. The cold weather, they say, acts on the lungs, and produces the weakness indirectly, whereas the necessary shutting up acts on the *nerves* and prevents them from having a chance of recovering their tone. And thus, without any mortal disease, or any disease of equivalent seriousness, I am thrown out of life, out of the ordinary sphere of its enjoyment and activity, and made a burden to myself and to others."

In the autumn of 1838 it was clear that she could not face the London winter, and Torquay was the place of retreat selected. Thither she accordingly went with her brother Edward, her chosen companion, as we have seen, of her family, the one she clung to most, whose sympathy was dearest to her. For the next year and

more she was in an extremely precarious state, and it was necessary to postpone indefinitely her return to London. Her father and the rest of her family paid her visits from time to time; but she saw no one else, and appears to have been unequal to much correspondence with her friends. It was here, however, that she began her literary friendship with R. H. Horne, the fantastic poet of "Orion," with whom she corresponded for years without seeing him. Part of a letter to H. S. Boyd of July 8, 1840, may be quoted for its glimpses of her life and occupations at this time.

"I have not rallied this summer as soon and well as I did last. I was very ill early in April at the time of our becoming conscious to our great affliction—so ill as to believe it utterly improbable, speaking humanly, that I ever should be any better. I am, however, a very great deal better, and gain strength by sensible degrees, however slowly, and do hope for the best—'the best' meaning one sight more of London. In the mean time I have not yet been able to leave my bed.

"To prove to you that I who 'used to care' for poetry do so still, and that I have not been absolutely idle lately, an *Athenæum* shall be sent to you containing a poem on the subject of the removal of Napoleon's ashes. It is a fitter subject for you than for me. Napoleon is no idol of mine. I never made a 'setting sun' of him. But my physician suggested the subject as a noble one, and then there was something suggestive in the consideration that the 'Bellerophon' lay on those very bay-waters opposite to my bed.

"Another poem (which you won't like, I dare say) is called 'The Lay of the Rose,' and appeared lately in a magazine. Arabel is going to write it out for you, she desires me to tell you with her best love. Indeed, I have written lately (as far as manuscript goes) a good deal, only on all sorts of subjects and in as many shapes.

"Lazarus would make a fine poem, wouldn't he? I lie here, weaving a great many schemes. I am seldom at a loss for thread."

It was in the middle of this cheerful tranquillity that the great sorrow of her life suddenly fell upon her. Her life, in spite of the gradual renunciations which her ill-health forced upon her, had been a happy one, full of sweet ambitions and encircled by brotherly and sisterly devotion. It is true that when people show resignation it is easy for onlookers to call it contentment; yet it hardly seems as if she had beaten the bars of her life hitherto, or rebelled against the view that her family had obviously formed and grown used to—the view, namely, that she was in an exceptional position, and could look for none but a secluded life of ill-health, in which her literary gift gave her a fortunate compensation for the things she would have to do without. The family mind soon adjusts itself to disabilities in one of its members, till the unnatural becomes the normal; and Elizabeth's instinctive sweetness and patience fitted appropriately into the comfortable scheme. Moreover, she had one companion who really understood her, one brother who saved her from the loneliness of feeling that one's virtues are accepted as a matter of course. She had now to make this last renunciation.

Three days after the letter just quoted was written, on July 11, 1840, Edward Barrett went out with two friends in a small sailing-boat. It was a clear day, and they had an experienced seaman with them ; but anxiety began to be felt when at nightfall they still had not returned. After three terrible days it was found that the boat had foundered in Babbacombe Bay, and that all three friends were drowned.

It is impossible to dwell on the depths of agony, the bitter self-reproach—for she could not forget that her brother's presence at Torquay had been due to her—the tormented passion of grief through which Elizabeth Barrett passed during the next months. She had absolutely no reserve of strength with which to meet it ; none of the merciful insensibility of the body with which robust people can face and gradually master the desolating agonies of the mind. She fell under the stroke, and lay for long not far from death, and nearer still—so it afterwards seemed to her—to insanity. Far on in the following winter her bodily strength began unexpectedly to rally ; and not till then was she able to fight the torment of associations and memories by incessant intellectual work. A letter of March 29, 1841, reveals something of the desolation, the sudden quenching of hope and happiness which she endured at this time.

“ My dearest Mrs. Martin,—Have you thought ‘ The dream has come true ’ ? I mean the dream of the flowers which you pulled for me and I wouldn't look at, even ? I fear you must have thought that the dream about my ingratitude has come true.

"And yet it has not. Dearest Mrs. Martin, it has *not*. I have not forgotten you or remembered you less affectionately through all the silence, or longed less for the letters I did not ask for. But the truth is, my faculties seem to hang heavily now, like flappers when the spring is broken. *My* spring is broken, and a separate exertion is necessary for the lifting up of each—and then it falls down again. I never felt so before : there is no wonder that I should feel so now. Nevertheless, I don't give up much to the pernicious languor—the tendency to lie down to sleep among the snows of a weary journey—I don't give up much to it. Only I find it sometimes at the root of certain negligences—for instance, of this toward *you*. . . . And Mrs. Hanford ! Do you know, I tremble in my reveries sometimes, lest you should think it, guess it to be half unkind in me not to have made an exertion to see Mrs. Hanford. It was not from want of interest in her—least of all from want of love to *you*. But I have not stirred from my bed yet. But, to be honest, that was not the reason—I did not feel as if I *could*, without a painful effort, which, on the other hand, could not, I was conscious, result in the slightest shade of satisfaction to her, receive and talk to her. Perhaps it is hard for you to *fancy* even how I shrink away from the very thought of seeing a human face—except those immediately belonging to me in love or relationship—(*yours does*, you know)—and a stranger's might be easier to look at than one long known. . . ."

Gradually she faced the grim task of taking up her life again where she had left it. It was an added bitterness

that she had to confront the same way of life, the same occupations, the same scenes as before. It was long before there could be any thought of moving her from Torquay ; and for months she had to sit surrounded by all the darkest associations of her life ; everything goading her to beat against that wall of death which seems too sudden, too much the work of an unreasonable moment, for the mind to grasp the idea of its permanence ; no intellectual effort, nothing but the mere lapse of time can make it seem natural that such an accident should be irremediable. Work was the only alleviation, no doubt ; but when every hope and ambition have lost their savour it is hard to preserves one's faith in that panacea, and doubly hard to embrace it without faith. It was a sign of the highest courage in Elizabeth Barrett that she was able, as she lay within perpetual sound of the sea, to take up with interest her correspondence with R. H. Horne, and even to develop with him more than one literary scheme. Chief among these was the extraordinarily unpromising idea, afterwards dropped, of a work in which they were to collaborate, a lyrical, allegorical drama, in Greek form, to be called "*Psyche Apoclypte*," dealing in a metaphysical, dis-embodyed fashion with the birth of the human soul. Another scheme, eventually carried through, was for a volume of modernized versions from Chaucer, to which Miss Barrett contributed one or two.

Thus with little help from the outside world, partly by sheer determination, partly by her strong and absolutely simple piety, she put her desolation resolutely behind her, and roused herself to a renewed interest in what was left to her. To her poetry, which had been to her a prayer

and a flame, she could still turn, even in the blank reaction from her first grief. Yet there is a touching little sentence in a letter to Horne at this time, which shows how even that resource had lost its brilliance. "Ah! when I was ten years old," she writes, "I beat you all—you and Napoleon and all—in ambition; but now I only want to get home." She craved to leave Torquay, and through the summer of 1841 she gradually revived enough to make the journey a possibility. At last, in August of that year, an invalid's carriage was brought down from London, and by very easy stages she was able to reach home. To the end of her life the thought of that smiling Devonshire coast never lost its bitterness. She carried away a wound that never healed; she had lost the best possession of her life, and though she seemed to acquiesce, though her friends grew happy about her, as the phrase is, a chance word or allusion was enough, years afterwards, to make her quail with agony. To all but those who knew her best, however, and perhaps even to them, she seemed to have mastered this sorrow when she returned, frailer than ever, to the dull London house from which she slipped, five years later, to join her husband.

III

WIMPOLE STREET

1841-1845

FOR the next five years, from 1841, that is, until her marriage, Elizabeth Barrett never left London, and for months together never left the house. She lay on the sofa of her room, seeing few people except her brothers and sisters, though corresponding with many. She worked incessantly at her poetry, and accepted with patient resignation the family view that her youth was past, and that she could look for nothing more from life but a certain amount of academic reputation. It was a position in which a far meeker soul than hers might well have rebelled ; there are few things more galling than to be forced by other people into the part of an intellectual onlooker, forbidden to hold a stake in the irresponsible life of normal men and women. But Elizabeth's heart was broken by grief, and it was easier for her to start a life of quiet work and seclusion in the *rôle* of one whose freshness was gone, doomed to a cultured virginity, than to remember that she was still only thirty-five and not incurably ill. She had lost so much that she could not believe she had not lost everything. So, keeping her

undying grief to herself, she built up an outside existence of literary interests, and few people or none suspected that it was only a shield behind which she mourned her intolerable loss. She kept her room, sheltered by her family as a rose might be sheltered in a dark cellar, till she grew tired of watching for the health that was so long in returning, and believed that no more than a few grey years of imprisonment awaited her.

Domestic life in Wimpole Street was not at any time brilliant. But at present there was at any rate peace ; Mr. Barrett had his submissive family in good order, and as yet none of them showed undue signs of realizing that they were men and women. So peaceful indeed it was, that it figures very little in Elizabeth's letters ; but stray hints and reflections may be gathered here and there of her room, her brothers, her father, which help out the quiet picture.

"No, you would certainly never recognize my prison if you were to see it. The bed, like a sofa and no bed ; the large table placed out in the room, towards the wardrobe end of it ; the sofa rolled where a sofa should be rolled —opposite the armchair : the drawers crowned with a coronal of shelves fashioned by Sette and Co. (of papered deal and crimson merino) to carry my books ; the washing table opposite turned into a cabinet with another coronal of shelves ; and Chaucer's and Homer's busts in guard over these two departments of English and Greek poetry ; three more busts consecrating the wardrobe which there was no annihilating ; and the window—oh, I must take a new paragraph for the window : I am out of breath.

"In the window is fixed a deep box full of soil, where are

springing up my scarlet runners, nasturtiums, and convolvulus, although they were disturbed a few days ago by the revolutionary insertion among them of a great ivy root with trailing branches so long and wide that the top tendrils are fastened to Henrietta's window of the higher storey, while the lower one cover all my panes. It is Mr. Kenyon's gift. He makes the like to flourish out of mere flower-pots, and embower his balconies and windows, and why shouldn't this flourish with me? But certainly—there is no shutting my eyes to the fact that it does droop a little. Papa prophesies hard things against it every morning, 'Why, Ba, it looks worse and worse,' and everybody preaches despondency. I, however, persist in being sanguine, looking out for new shoots, and making a sure pleasure in the meanwhile by listening to the sound of the leaves against the pane, as the wind lifts them and lets them fall. Well, what do you think of my ivy? Ask Mr. Martin, if he isn't jealous already."

"My dearest Mrs. Martin, . . . Well, papa came back from Cornwall just as I came back to my own room, and he was as pleased with his quarry as I was to have the sight again of his face. During his absence, Henrietta had a little polka (which did not bring the house down on its knees), and I had a transparent blind put up in my open window. There is a castle in the blind, and a castle gateway, and two walks, and several peasants, and groves of trees which rise in excellent harmony with the fall of my green damask curtains—new, since you saw me last. Papa insults me with the analogy of a back window in a confectioner's shop, but is obviously moved

when the sunshine lights up the castle, notwithstanding. And Mr. Kenyon and everybody in the house grow ecstatic rather than otherwise, as they stand in contemplation before it, and tell me (what is obvious without their evidence) that the effect is beautiful, and that the whole room catches a light from it. Well, and then Mr. Kenyon has given me a new table, with a rail round it to consecrate it from Flush's paws, and large enough to hold all my varieties of vanities."

"Our 'event' just now is a new purchase of a 'Holy Family,' supposed to be by Andrea del Sarto. It has displaced the Glover over the chimney-piece in the drawing-room, and dear Stormie and Alfred nearly broke their backs in carrying it upstairs for me to see before the placing. It is probably a fine picture, and I seem to see my way through the dark of my ignorance, to admire the grouping and colouring, whatever doubt as to the expression and divinity may occur otherwise. Well, you will judge. I won't tell you *how* I think of it. And you won't care if I do. There is also a new very pretty landscape piece, and you may imagine the local politics of the arrangement and hanging, with their talk and consultation ; while *I*, on the storey higher, have my arranging to manage of my pretty new books and my three hyacinths, and a pot of primroses which dear Mr. Kenyon had the good nature to carry himself through the streets to our door. But all the flowers forswear me, and die either suddenly or gradually as soon as they become aware of the want of fresh air and light in my room. Talking of air and light, what exquisite weather this is ! What a summer in winter ! It is the fourth day

since I have had the fire wrung from me by the heat of temperature, and I sit here *very warm indeed*, notwithstanding that bare grate. Nay, yesterday I had the door thrown open for above an hour, and was warm still ! You need not ask, you see, how I am."

And here is an episode, described with great spirit, which occurred after the arrival of one of Mr. Boyd's periodic gifts of Cyprus wine—

"MY VERY DEAR FRIEND,

"I cannot be certain, from my recollections, whether I did or did not write to you before, as you suggest ; but as you never received the letter and I was in a continual pressure of different thoughts, the probability is that I did not write. The Cyprus wine in the second vial I certainly *did* receive ; and was grateful to you with the whole force of the aroma of it. And now I will tell you an anecdote.

"In the excess of my filial tenderness, I poured out a glass for papa, and offered it to him with my right hand.

"*'What is this ?'* said he.

"*'Taste it,'* said I as laconically, but with more emphasis.

"He raised it to his lips ; and, after a moment, recoiled, with such a face as sinned against Adam's image, and with a shudder of deep disgust.

"*'Why,'* he said, '*what most beastly and nauseous thing is this ? Oh,'* he said, '*what detestable drug is this ? Oh, oh,'* he said, '*I shall never, never, get this horrible taste out of my mouth.'*

"I explained with the proper degree of dignity, that '*it was Greek wine, Cyprus wine, and of very great value.'*

"He retorted with acrimony, that 'it might be Greek, twice over ; but that it was exceedingly beastly.'

"I resumed, with persuasive argument, that 'it could scarcely be beastly, inasmuch as the taste reminded one of oranges and orange flower together, to say nothing of the honey of Mount Hymettus.'

"He took me up with stringent logic, 'that any wine must positively be beastly, which pretending to be wine, tasted sweet as honey, and that it was beastly on my own showing !' I send you this report as an evidence of a curious opinion. But drinkers of port wine cannot be expected to judge of nectar—and I hold your 'Cyprus' to be pure nectar."

Such fragments as these admit one for a moment inside the doors of the house. They hold out a sort of personal intimacy, a sense of her presence, something altogether more seductive than the mere record of opinions and sentiments. It is worth while fixing the impression of the little, bright-eyed creature, all tenderness and enthusiasm, not marred by ill-health, but full of soft attractions and femininities, before proceeding to illustrate the busy variety of her correspondence with friends outside the house.

Her literary work began very soon after her return to London with a series of papers in the *Athenæum* on the Greek Christian poets, a subject well suited to the part of the learned and poetical recluse for which she had been cast. Her knowledge of them was mainly due to Mr. Boyd's imperious, eclectic taste, and he was at hand in London to help her with his advice. Her letters during the winter of 1840–41 are mostly addressed to him, and

are chiefly concerned with the subject of these papers ; but she also continued to read more classical writers than Synesius and John of Euchaita.

“ Could you really imagine that I have not looked into the Greek tragedians for years, with my true love for Greek poetry ? That is asking a question, you will say, and not answering it. Well, then, I answer by a ‘ Yes ’ the one you put to me. I had two volumes of Euripides with me in Devonshire, and have read him as well as Æschylus and Sophocles—that is *from* them—both before and since I went there. You know I have gone through every line of the three tragedians long ago, in the way of regular, consecutive reading.

“ You know also that I had at different times read different dialogues of Plato ; but when three years ago, and a few months previous to my leaving home, I became possessed of a complete edition of his works, edited by Bekker, why then I began with the first volume and went through the whole of his writings, both those I knew and those I did not know, one after another : and have at this time read, not only all that is properly attributed to Plato, but even those dialogues and epistles which pass falsely under his name—everything except two books, I think, or three, of the treatise ‘ De Legibus,’ which I shall finish in a week or two, as soon as I can take breath from Mr. Dilke.”

The Greek papers were followed by another series on English poets ; and the passages—they are not many—in her letters during these years in which she speaks of some of them, may be collected here. They do not show

exceptional felicities of language, or any very acute *flair* in their criticisms ; indeed, it must be confessed that a certain amount of imagination must be thrown into the reading of them to make them of much interest. But they are worth attention, not merely for the general soundness of taste which they indicate, but because they illustrate the temper of her mind,—her good sense, to put it shortly,—the very characteristic way in which she combined unquenched enthusiasm with a steady sense of proportion. This is perhaps a good deal to read into these small extracts ; but the same thing runs through her opinions on nearly all subjects ; and to note it is to see that when in later years her enthusiasm broke down the sanity of her perception, it was due to a certain weakening of her hold over her mind, not to an inherent incapacity for taking a judicial view.

“ As to your ‘ words of fire ’ about Wordsworth, if I had but a cataract at command I would try to quench them. His powers should not be judged of by my extracts or by anybody’s extracts from his last-published volume. Do you remember his grand ode upon Childhood—worth, to my apprehension, just twenty of Dryden’s ‘ St. Cecilia’s Day ’—his sonnet upon Westminster Bridge, his lyric on a lark, in which the lark’s music swells and exults, and the many noble and glorious passages of his ‘ Excursion ’ ? You must not indeed blame me for estimating Wordsworth at *his height*, and on the other side I readily confess to you that he is occasionally, and not unfrequently, heavy and dull, and that Coleridge had an intenser genius. Tell me if you know anything of Tennyson. He has just

published two volumes of poetry, one of which is a re-publication, but both full of inspiration."

"If you do find the paper I was invited to write upon Wordsworth, you will see to which class of your admiring or abhorring friends I belong. Perhaps you will cry out quickly, 'To the blind admirers, certes.' And I have a high admiration of Wordsworth. His spirit has worked a good work, and has freed into the capacity of work other noble spirits. He took the initiative in a great poetic movement, and is not only to be praised for what he has done, but for what he has helped his age to do. For the rest, Byron has more passion and intensity, Shelley more fancy and music, Coleridge could see further into the unseen, and not one of those poets has insulted his own genius by the production of whole poems, such as I could name of Wordsworth's, the vulgarity of which is childish, and the childishness vulgar. Still, the wings of his genius are wide enough to cast a shadow over its feet, and our gratitude should be stronger than our critical acumen. Yes, I *will* be a blind admirer of Wordsworth's. I *will* shut my eyes and be blind. Better so, than see too well for the thankfulness which is his due from me. . . ."

"Tennyson is a great poet, I think, and Browning, the author of 'Paracelsus,' has to my mind very noble capabilities. Do you know Mr. Horne's 'Orion,' the poem published for a farthing, to the wonder of booksellers and bookbuyers who could not understand 'the speculation in its eyes'? There are very fine things in this poem, and altogether I recommend it to your attention. But what is 'wanting' in Tennyson? He can think, he

can feel, and his language is highly expressive, characteristic, and harmonious. I am very fond of Tennyson. He makes me thrill sometimes to the end of my fingers, as only a true great poet can.

"This 'Pathfinder' (what an excellent name for an American journal !) I also owe to you, with the summing up of your performances in it, and with a notice of Mr. Browning's 'Blot on the 'Scutcheon,' which would make one poet furious (the 'infelix Talfourd') and another a little melancholy — namely, Mr. Browning himself. There is truth on both sides, but it seems to me hard truth on Browning. I do assure you I never saw him in my life—do not know him even by correspondence—and yet, whether through fellow-feeling for Eleusinian Mysteries, or whether through the more generous motive of appreciation of his powers, I am very sensitive to the thousand and one stripes with which the assembly of critics doth expound its vocation over him, and the *Athenaeum* for instance, made me quite cross and misanthropical last week. The truth is—and the world should know the truth—it is easier to find a more faultless writer than a poet of equal genius."

Here is an admirable letter on Ossian, whom Mr. Boyd had suddenly swung over the heads of Homer and Æschylus—

"MY VERY DEAR FRIEND,

"My surprise was inexpressible at your utterance of the name. What ! Ossian superior as a poet to Homer ! Mr. Boyd saying so ! Mr. Boyd treading down the neck

of Æschylus while he praises Ossian ! The fact appears to me that anomalous thing among believers—a miracle without an occasion.

“ I confess I never, never should have guessed the name ; not though I had guessed to Doomsday. In the first place I do not believe in Ossian, and having partially examined the testimony (for I don’t pretend to any exact learning about it) I consider him as the poetical *lay figure* upon which Mr. Macpherson dared to cast his personality. There is a sort of phraseology, nay, an identity of occasional phrases, from the antique—but that these so-called Ossianic poems were ever discovered and translated as they stand in their present form, I believe in no wise. As Dr. Johnson wrote to Macpherson, so I would say, ‘Mr. Macpherson, I thought you an imposter, and think so still.’ ”

“ It is many years ago since I looked at Ossian, and I never did much delight in him, as that fact proves. Since your letter came I have taken him up again, and have just finished ‘Carthon.’ There are beautiful passages in it, the most beautiful beginning, I think, ‘Desolate is the dwelling of Moina,’ and the next place being filled by that address to the sun you magnify so with praise. But the charm of these things is the *only* charm of all the poems. There is a sound of wild vague music in a monotone—nothing is articulate, nothing *individual*, nothing various. Take away a few poetical phrases from these poems, and they are colourless and bare. Compare them with the old burning ballads, with a wild heart beating in each. How cold they grow in the comparison ! Compare them with Homer’s grand breathing personalities, with Æschylus’s—nay, but I cannot bear upon my lips or finger the charge

of the blasphemy of such comparing, even for religion's sake. . .”

She continues the discussion in her next letter, at the end of which she adds with delicate malice and humour—

“*I am thinking* (this is said in a whisper, and in confidence—of two kinds), *I am thinking that you don't admire him quite as much as you did three weeks ago.*”

It is worth remembering here her felicitous characterization of Ossian in “A Vision of Poets”—

“Ossian, dimly seen or guessed ;
Once counted greater than the rest,
When mountain-winds blew out his vest.”

It was with an emotion very different from the temperate lucidity of her literary judgments that Miss Barrett rushed to meet the fragments of what seemed news from the occult world, which were beginning to fly abroad at this time. Mesmerism, during those years, was an alluring, half-terrific word, before which few people were able to preserve their presence of mind, and to Elizabeth Barrett the subject was one of absorbing interest. There was a strain of mysticism in her which leapt to meet any suggestion that the spirit might escape from the control of the flesh, and the rumours of this unaccountable force, which seemed to be upsetting all natural laws, stirred her deeply. The trouble is that now, when we have assimilated the idea of mesmerism as completely as we have the idea of electricity, the popular speculations and scepticisms of early Victorian days have an undeniably flatness. It is sometimes difficult to follow Miss Barrett's excitement on the

subject without impatience. Mesmerism is now an accepted fact, and ordinary people trouble about its explanation as little as they do about the theory of electricity when they despatch a telegram. But the popular mind had to be fluttered by it before it could be put in its place as a scientific fact, to be treated scientifically, and Miss Barrett was swayed like the rest. No one could then foresee the comfortable place to which the idea has settled down in our later life and thought. The gate seemed to be suddenly opened to unimagined terrors.

"Mrs. Martin is surprised at me and others on account of our 'horror.' Surely it is a natural feeling, and she would herself be liable to it if she were *more credulous*. The agency seems to me like the shaking of the flood-gates placed by the Divine Creator between the unprepared soul and the unseen world. Then—the subjection of the will and vital powers of one individual to those of another, to the extent of the apparent solution of the very identity, is abhorrent from me. And then (as to the expediency of the matter, and to prove how far believers may be carried) there is even now a religious sect at Cheltenham, of persons who call themselves advocates of the 'third revelation,' and profess to receive their system of theology entirely from patients in the sleep.

"In the mean time, poor Miss Martineau, as the consequence of her desire to speak the truth as she apprehends it, is overwhelmed with atrocious insults from all quarters. For my own part I would rather fall into the hands of God than of man, and suffer as she did in the body, instead of being the mark of these cruel observations. But she

has singular strength of mind, and calmly continues her testimony."

But at this time there was nothing hysterical in Miss Barrett's attitude, nor was it that tripartite mixture of stupidity and ignorance and affectation which is so often that of ordinary people when they find themselves in the presence of the unseen. Most people's ideas upon occult subjects are stupid, because they do not see that the region of trances and hallucinations is psychological, and that the key to them is to be searched for in the machinery of the mind ; the matter is not one for speculation for the scientific accumulation of evidence. They are also ignorant, for they usually have no idea how far the key has actually been found. But most of all they are affected ; they believe because it is picturesque to believe, not because their faith has any vital meaning for them. This was all absolutely different with Miss Barrett. She leapt at no conclusions ; she saw that evidence must be patiently collected and weighed ; and she was far indeed from casting a picturesque glamour over the subject. The thought of it affected her profoundly ; she saw the enormous importance of it all if it could be established ; and she shrank from the thought of the cataclysm, the ruin of the walls of individuality which it seemed to imply.

"She [Mrs. Jameson] said of mesmerism altogether," so she writes, "that she was inclined to believe it, but had not finally made up her convictions. She used words so exactly like some I have used myself that I must repeat them, 'that if there was *anything* in it, there was *so much*,

it became scarcely possible to limit consequences, and the subject grew awful to contemplate. . . .”

The more difficult and more discomposing subject of spiritualism we shall meet with later on. So far we hear only of mesmerism, still in its most tentative stages, and very imperfectly understood and controlled.

“Miss Mitford writes to me: ‘Be sure it is *all true*. I see it every day in my Jane’—her maid, who is mesmerised for deafness, but not, I believe, with much success curatively. As a remedy, the success has been far greater in the Martineau case than in others. With Miss Mitford’s maid, the sleep is, however, produced; and the girl professed, at the third *séance*, to be able to *see behind her*.”

It is strange to find that while she stood with such excitement on the edge of this region of the unseen, fascinated and appalled by the obscure prospect, she looked out over the vaster precipice of death with the simplest possible serenity. Her religion had nothing whatever sensational or morbid about it, and equally it had nothing speculative or impatient. Her training had been non-conformist in character, and her strong faith remained to the end an inheritance from her childhood, simple and untroubled, not quite deeply based enough to save her from some injustice to forms that differed from her own, not intellectual enough to make her face the darker problems of death and sin; but instinct with all the ingenuous tenderness, the trust, the faithful humanity of her nature. She writes to a friend in December, 1843—

"In answer to a question which you put to me long ago on the subject of books of theology, I will confess to you that, although I have read rather widely the divinity of the Greek Fathers, Gregory, Chrysostom, and so forth, and have, of course, informed myself in the works generally of our old English divines, Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and so forth, I am not by any means a frequent reader of books of theology as such, and as the men of our times have made them. I have looked into the 'Tracts' from curiosity and to hear what the world was talking of, and I was disappointed *even* in the degree of intellectual power displayed in them. From motives of a desire of theological instruction I very seldom read any book except God's own. The minds of persons are differently constituted; and it is no praise to mine to admit that I am apt to receive less of what is called edification from human discourses on divine subjects, than disturbance and hindrance. I read the Scriptures every day, and in as simple a spirit as I can; thinking as little as possible of the controversies engendered in that great sunshine, and as much as possible of the heat and glory belonging to it. It is a sure fact in my eyes that we do not require so much *more knowledge*, as a stronger apprehension, by the faith and affections, of what we already know."

Flush's name has become classical, first of all by being enshrined in an extremely long and slipshod poem of his owner's, and latterly by the continual part he plays in the story of Browning's visits to Wimpole Street, that in fact of the one and only onlooker. As everybody knows, he was a spaniel, the gift of Miss Mitford, with eyes as bright and

curls as soft as his mistress's. They loved each other with tender devotion ; his post was in her room, and nothing could tempt him out to the enjoyment of a freer life. But he had a singularly chequered career, being stolen no less than three times, always by the same firm of brigands, to be submissively ransomed each time at an increasing price. Here is Miss Barrett's account of the second of these disasters.

"Well ; but Flushie ! It is too true that he has been lost—lost and won ; and true besides that I was a good deal upset by it *meo more* ; and that I found it hard to eat and sleep as usual while he was in the hands of his enemies. It is a secret too. We would not tell papa of it. Papa would have been angry with the unfortunate person who took Flush out without a chain ; and would have kicked against the pricks of the necessary bribing of the thief in order to the getting him back. Therefore we didn't tell papa : and as I had a very bad convenient headache the day my eyes were reddest, I did not see him (except once) till Flush was on the sofa again. As to the thieves, you are very kind to talk daggers at them ; and I feel no inclination to say 'Don't.' It is quite too bad and cruel. And think of their exceeding insolence in taking Flush away from this very door, while Arabel was waiting to have the door opened on her return from her walk ; and in observing (as they gave him back for six guineas and a half) that they intended to have him again at the earliest opportunity and that *then* they must have *ten* guineas ! I tell poor Flushie (while he looks very earnestly in my face) that he and I shall be ruined at last, and that I shall have no

money to buy him cakes ; but the worst is the anxiety ! Whether I am particularly silly, or not, I don't know ; they say here, that I am ; but it seems to me impossible for anybody who really cares for a dog, to think quietly of his being in the hands of those infamous men. And then I know how poor Flushie must feel it. When he was brought home, he began to cry in his manner, whine, as if his heart was full ! It was just what I was inclined to do myself—‘and thus was Flushie lost and won.’”

While she wrote and corresponded largely, very few visitors were during these years admitted to her quiet chamber. Horne, with whom she had become quite intimate by letter, was never allowed to approach ; and perhaps the very fact that they never met made it the easier for her to range in her letters over all kinds of literary topics with unembarrassed freedom. “Psyche Apocalypte” dragged on a nebulous existence ; Chaucer was civilized almost out of knowledge ; and finally in the “New Spirit of the Age,” a series of contemporary celebrities were collected and appraised, to the equal dissatisfaction of those who were admitted and those who were excluded. In the two latter schemes Miss Barrett took an active part, diligently annotating Horne’s proofs, and herself contributing versions from Chaucer, besides what we have learnt to call “appreciations” of Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, and Landor. A paragraph from her account of the latter will show her sureness of touch, as well as her urbane dignity of style when she wrote prose deliberately :—

“He writes criticism for critics, and poetry for poets ; his drama, when he is dramatic, will suppose neither pit

nor gallery, nor critics, nor laws. He is not a publican among poets—he does not sell his Amreeta cups upon the highway. He delivers them rather with the dignity of a giver to ticketed persons; analyzing their flavour and fragrance with a learned delicacy, and an appeal to the esoteric. His very spelling of English is uncommon and theoretic; and as if poetry were not, in English, a sufficiently unpopular dead language, he has had recourse to writing poetry in Latin; with dissertations on the Latin tongue, to fence it out doubly from the populace. *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo.*"

Miss Martineau was another unseen correspondent of hers.

"I have had great pleasure lately," she writes to Horne in August, 1843, "in some correspondence with Miss Martineau, the noblest female intelligence between the seas,—'as sweet as spring, as ocean deep.' She is in a hopeless anguish of body, and serene triumph of spirit, with at once no hope and all hope! To hear from her was both a pleasure and honour to me."

To exchange letters without meeting is to enjoy many immunities on both sides. It is reassuring to feel that your correspondent is not reading your practice or your habits into your professions and opinions, or hearing the tones of your voice in your ornate or staggering phrases. And to judge from her letters to Horne, Miss Barrett wrote more freely, less conventionally, in answer to these hidden voices than she did to the friends who knew her personally. It is a thousand pities that Miss Martineau, in

the exercise of that delicacy which looks so right at the time and is so tantalizing afterwards, burnt all the letters she had had from her friend. It would have been pleasant to see what passed from the eager, sheltered little poetess to the valiant, maligned woman, who was now being snatched back from a horrible death, so it seemed, by the spirits of the air. Miss Barrett watched with intent interest Harriet Martineau's restoration to health under mesmeric influences ; and often championed her to other friends, when the author of "*Letters on Mesmerism*" scandalized the public by her transgressions of the laws of true womanliness, as dictated sixty years ago.

Elizabeth Barrett had the right genius for friendship, which is able to find friends in very different kinds of people. With Miss Mitford, that genial soul, she remained on terms of the truest affection and intimacy, in spite of the twenty years between their ages. "Dearest dear Miss Mitford," as she is addressed, is allowed to penetrate into the house and spend long hours of happy talk in the room with the ivy over the window. Another valuable friendship was inaugurated in 1844, when Mrs. Anna Jameson, apparently after some persistence, succeeded in effecting an entry. This lady had already had fifty years of chequered life. She had begun as a governess and had married unfortunately. But by this time her husband was at the safe distance of the West Indies, where he had an appointment, and Mrs. Jameson was leading a pleasantly free and industrious life, establishing herself in one country after another, making friends in all the capitals of Europe, and issuing her cheerful and sensible volumes in quick succession. As yet, however, she had not yet chanced on the

province in which she still contributes so charmingly to our enjoyment, the happy region of the "Legends of the Monastic Orders." Many more people must be familiar with the kind and homely spirit of these volumes than will be prepared to recognize the portrait Miss Barrett gives of their author:—

"Mrs. Jameson came again to this door with a note, and overcoming by kindness, was let in on Saturday last; and sate with me for nearly an hour, and so ran into what my sisters call 'one of my sudden intimacies' that there was an embrace for a farewell. Of course she won my affections through my vanity (Mr. Martin will be sure to say, so I hasten to anticipate him) and by exaggerations about my poetry; but really, and although my heart beat itself almost to pieces for fear of seeing her as she walked upstairs, I do think I should have liked her *without the flattery*. She is very light—has the lightest of eyes, the lightest of complexions; no eyebrows, and what looked to me like very pale red hair, and thin lips of no colour at all. But with all this indecision of exterior the expression is rather acute than soft; and the conversation in its principal characteristics, analytical and examinative; throwing out no thought which is not as clear as glass—critical, in fact, in somewhat of an austere sense. I use 'austere,' of course, in its intellectual relation, for nothing in the world could be kinder, or more graciously kind, than her whole manner and words were to me. She is coming again in two or three days, she says."

It is almost disconcerting to find the indulgent writer

we know, who guides us so blandly through apocryphal legends and primitive art, in this thin-lipped lady of nondescript appearance, whose characteristic seems to be all decisiveness and intellectuality, instead of the mere amiability and enthusiasm we had expected. But Mrs. Jameson had more extensive reserves of character than might be gathered from her books. She was an admirable friend to the Brownings in later years, and was of all their old circle of acquaintance the one who saw most of them in their Italian retreat.

But the chief friend of all was still the kind old dilettante, John Kenyon. He was the only man, except her father and brothers and an occasional uncle, to whom as yet she opened her door. There was, as we have seen, some far-fetched consanguinity between him and the Barretts, which gave him a kind of right in the house ; but of all the family Elizabeth was his friend and *protégée*. The rest seem to have recognized him as her property, and it gives an insight into the extraordinary constitution of the household to find Elizabeth writing that she had never dared (knowing it would be useless) to suggest that this good and discreet old friend should be invited to dinner by her father. He was *her* friend ; Mr. Barrett would not interfere with that ; but he would not have Mr. Kenyon consider himself a friend of the family.

Mr. Kenyon had adopted towards Elizabeth an attitude which sat pleasantly upon him, that of the benevolent but plain-speaking uncle. He lectured her upon the faults of her writing, laughed at her enthusiasms, and all the time glowed with pride in her genius. She on her side stood up bravely, maintaining that he misunderstood what he called

her carelessness, that her obscurities were not mannerisms, nor her vicious rhymes the result of insufficient pains—

“ Well, but am I really so bad ? ‘ *Et tu !* ’ Can you call me careless ? Remember all the altering of manuscript and proof—and remember how the obscurities used to fly away before your cloud-compelling, when you were the Jove of the criticisms ! That the books (I won’t call them *our* books when I am speaking of the faults) are remarkable for defects and superfluities of evil, I can see quite as well as another ; but then I won’t admit that ‘ it comes ’ of my carelessness, and refusing to take pains. On the contrary, my belief is, that very few writers called ‘ correct,’ who have selected classical models to work from, pay more laborious attention than I do habitually to the forms of thought and expression. ‘ Lady Geraldine ’ was an exception in her whole history. If I write fast sometimes (and the historical fact is that what has been written fastest has pleased most), I am not apt to print without consideration. I appeal to Philip sober, if I am ! My dearest cousin, do remember ! As to the faults, I do not think of defending them, be very sure. My consolation is, that I may try to do better in time, if I may talk of time. The worst fault of all, as far as expression goes (the adjective-substantives, whether in prose or verse, I cannot make up my mind to consider faulty), is that kind of obscurity which is the same thing with inadequate expression. Be very sure—try to be very sure—that I am not obstinate nor self-opinionated beyond measure. To *you* in any case, who have done so much for me, and who think of me so more than kindly, I feel it to be both duty and pleasure to defer and yield. Still, you

know, we could not, if we were ten years about it, alter down the poems to the terms of all these reviewers. You would not desire it, if it were possible."

There certainly was considerable colour for Mr. Kenyon's view. It was hard to see how those terrible rhymes, "Goethe" and "duty," "virtues" and "certes," and the rest, could be the result of a deliberate theory. But the position she adopted, such as it was, was definite enough.

"And now I must explain to you that most of the 'incorrectnesses' you speak of may be 'incorrectnesses,' but are not *negligences*. I have a theory about double rhymes for which I shall be attacked by the critics, but which I could justify perhaps on high authority, or at least analogy. In fact, these volumes of mine have more double rhymes than any two books of English poems that ever to my knowledge were printed; I mean of English poems *not comic*. Now, of double rhymes in use, which are perfect rhymes, you are aware how few there are, and yet you are also aware of what an admirable effect in making a rhythm various and vigorous, double rhyming is in English poetry. Therefore I have used a certain licence; and, after much thoughtful study of the Elizabethan writers, have ventured it with the public. And do *you* tell me, *you* who object to the use of a different vowel in a double rhyme, *why* you rhyme (as everybody does, without blame from anybody) 'given' to 'heaven,' when you object to my rhyming 'remember' and 'chamber'? The analogy surely is all on my side, and I *believe* that the spirit of the English language is also.

"I write all this because you will find many other sins of

the sort, besides those in the ‘‘Cyprus Wine ;’’ and because I wish you to consider the subject as *a point for consideration* seriously, and not to blame me as a writer of careless verses. If I deal too much in licences, it is not because I am idle, but because I am speculative for freedom’s sake. It is possible, you know, to be wrong conscientiously ; and I stand up for my conscience only.”

But even she admits that a headlong rush of imagination sometimes ran away with all her care ; and what her correspondents hardly seem to have understood—nor indeed did she—was that in those moments of impetuosity she reached her best. A touch of the right fire caught her up at such times. “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” was written at lightning speed, and in spite of all its theatrical grotesquenesses it is a more real poem than “Bertha in the Lane” or “The Dead Pan.” It burns its way forward in a tense, electrical atmosphere, instead of creeping diffusely to and fro, like so many of the poems, without ever piling itself into a climax. “The Cry of the Children” was another case. She writes of it to Mr. Boyd—

“ You are right in your complaint against the rhythm. The first stanza came into my head in a hurricane, and I was obliged to make the other stanzas like it—that is the whole mystery of the iniquity. If you look Mr. Lucas from head to foot, you will never find such a rhythm on his person. The whole crime of the versification belongs to me. So blame *me*, and by no means another poet, and I will humbly confess that I deserve to be blamed in some measure. There is a roughness, my own ear being witness

and I give up the body of my criminal to the rod of your castigation, kissing the last as if it were Flush."

Her fame had meanwhile been gradually spreading. "The Seraphim" had given her a certain public of her own, and a good deal of curiosity had besides been stimulated by vague rumours of her learning and brilliance and secluded life. Literary people in London talked of her, and wrote to her. Wordsworth, when he was in London in 1842, remembered his sight of her several years before, and asked Mr. Kenyon if he might go and see her, though that jealous guardian refused his permission. In all simplicity, without any scheming, the ground had been well prepared for a fresh publication. By 1844 she had enough material for two volumes, and found Moxon ready to publish them. They appeared in August of that year, and had a great and immediate success.

"Yes, I think I may say that I am satisfied so far with the aspect of things in relation to the book. You see there has scarcely been time yet to give any except a sanguine or desponding judgment—I mean, there is scarcely room yet for forming a very rational inference of what will ultimately be, without the presentiments of hope or fear. The book came out too late in August for any chance of a mention in the September magazines, and at the dead time of year, when the very critics were thinking more of holiday innocence than of their carnivorous instincts. This will not hurt it ultimately, although it might have hurt a *novel*. The regular critics will come back to it; and in the mean time the newspaper critics are noticing it all round, with more or less admissions to its advantage. The *Atlas* is the

best of the newspapers for literary notices ; and it spoke graciously on the whole ; though I do protest against being violently attached to a 'school.' I have faults enough, I know ; but it is just to say that they are at least my own. Well, then ! It is true that the *Westminster Review* says briefly what is great praise, and promises to take the earliest opportunity of reviewing me at 'large.' So that with regard to the critics, there seems to be a good prospect. Then I have had some very pleasant private letters—one from Carlyle ; an oath from Miss Martineau to give her whole mind to the work and tell me her free and full opinion, which I have not received yet ; an assurance from an acquaintance of Mrs. Jameson that she was much pleased. But the letter which pleased me most was addressed to me by a professional critic, personally unknown to me, who wrote to say that he had traced me up, step by step, ever since I began to print, and that my last volumes were so much better than any preceding them, and were such *living books*, that they restored to him the impulses of his youth and constrained him to thank me for the pleasant emotions they had excited. I cannot say the name of the writer of this letter, because he asked me not to do so, but of course it was very pleasant to read. Now, you will not call me vain for speaking of this. I would not speak of it ; only I want (you see) to prove to you how faithfully and gratefully I have a trust in your kindness and sympathy. It is certainly the best kindness to speak the truth to me. I have written those poems as well as I could, and I hope to write others better. I have not reached my own ideal ; and I cannot expect to have satisfied other people's expectation. But it is (as I sometimes say) the least ignoble part of me,

that I love poetry better than I love my own successes in it."

The popular mind, indeed, still unready for the visionary romanticism of Tennyson or Browning's recondite intensity, leapt eagerly at Miss Barrett's volumes, in spite of their obscurities, their incoherences, their frequent *longueurs* and even pedantries. They fell in with the taste of the day ; they fed its respect for seriousness, its love of the anecdote in art, its enthusiasm for a moral. Miss Barrett's art was ethical enough for any one ; she loved beauty, but she never isolated it from life and conduct, and with all her mental independence, her philosophy remained essentially within the bounds that popular taste prescribed. Her Berthas and her Geraldines were contemporary women ; the stuff of their minds was familiar, their very unconventionality was "of the period." She had written the volumes of 1844, as she said later, without ever having seen the world beyond her own secluded corner, and while her brothers and sisters of the earth were only names to her. But the spirit of the age had not failed to reach her there, and she spoke with a voice that was understood. How much of her work up to this time has kept its life after sixty years, is too large a question to fit into the scope of a book which does not profess to deal critically with her poetry. But this much at least may be said, that whatever the weakness of those poems may be, it is not due to lack of originality. The critics of her day who complained that she imitated Tennyson were grotesquely wide of the mark. There is nothing whatever imitative in her lyrics ; her style and methods are her own, unfortunate as they sometimes

are. If, therefore, they have lost colour, as so many of them undoubtedly have, it is not because they attempted something which had already been done, and done better. It is rather because they lack concentration, the thought drifting helplessly forward, instead of being secured and firmly anchored beforehand.

The fame which now surrounded her made no difference to her life. She did not regain her strength, and a visit to the drawing-room on the floor beneath was an event. Her sisters were always about her, and her brothers and her father visited her daily. The long hours were crowded with work ; she read more and more, wrote countless letters, and lavished labour on her poems. It was a real life, for all its isolation, not a dream ; yet under it all there was a sense of barrenness. The flower of her life seemed to have passed ; she had only had one piece of vital experience, and that was a tragedy which had broken her heart. She waited like an uncomplaining Mariana, hearing doors open and shut, feeling small stirrings of life round her, but expecting nothing more for herself, and accepting her solitude without bitterness—

“ I am thinking, lifting up my pen, what I can write to you which is likely to be interesting to you. After all I come to chaos and silence, and even old night—it is growing so dark. I live in London, to be sure, and except for the glory of it I might live in a desert, so profound is my solitude and so complete my isolation from things and persons without. I lie all day, and day after day, on the sofa, and my windows do not even look into the street. To abuse myself with a vain deceit of rural life I have had

ivy planted in a box, and it has flourished and spread over one window, and strikes against the glass with a little stroke from the thicker leaves when the wind blows at all briskly. *Then* I think of forests and groves; it is my triumph when the leaves strike the window-pane, and this is not a sound like a lament. Books and thoughts and dreams (almost too consciously *dreamed*, however, for me—the illusion of them has almost passed) and domestic tenderness can and ought to leave nobody lamenting. Also God's wisdom, deeply steeped in His love, *is* as far as we can stretch out our hands."

IV

ROBERT BROWNING

1845

" New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey.

" [Post-mark, January 10, 1845.]

" I LOVE your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,—and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write,—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius, and there a graceful and natural end of the thing. Since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me, for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration—perhaps even, as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter! —but nothing comes of it all—so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew. Oh, how different that is from lying to be dried and pressed flat, and prized highly, and put in a book with a proper account at top and bottom, and shut up and put away . . .

and the book called a ‘Flora,’ besides ! After all, I need not give up the thought of doing that, too, in time ; because even now, talking with whoever is worthy, I can give a reason for my faith in one and another excellence, the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought ; but in this addressing myself to you—your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too. Do you know I was once not very far from seeing—really seeing you ? Mr. Kenyon said to me one morning, ‘Would you like to see Miss Barrett ?’ then he went to announce me,—then he returned . . . you were too unwell, and now it is years ago, and I feel as at some untoward passage in my travels, as if I had been close, so close, to some world’s wonder in chapel or crypt, only a screen to push and I might have entered, but there was some slight, so it now seems, slight and just sufficient bar to admission, and the half-opened door shut, and I went home my thousands of miles, and the sight was never to be ?

“ Well, these Poems were to be, and this true thankful joy and pride with which I felt myself,

“ Yours ever faithfully,

“ ROBERT BROWNING.

“ Miss Barrett, 50, Wimpole St.

“ R. Browning.”

E. B. B. to R. B.

“ 50, Wimpole Street : Jan. 11, 1845.

“ I thank you, dear Mr. Browning, from the bottom of my heart. You meant to give me pleasure by your

letter—and even if the object had not been answered, I ought still to thank you. But it is thoroughly answered. Such a letter from such a hand ! Sympathy is dear—very dear to me: but the sympathy of a poet, and of such a poet, is the quintessence of sympathy to me ! Will you take back my gratitude for it ?—agreeing, too, that of all the commerce done in the world, from Tyre to Carthage, the exchange of sympathy for gratitude is the most princely thing !

“ For the rest, you draw me on with your kindness. It is difficult to get rid of people when you once have given them too much pleasure—that is a fact, and we will not stop for the moral of it. What I was going to say—after a little natural hesitation—is, that if ever you emerge without inconvenient effort from your ‘passive state,’ and will *tell* me of such faults as rise to the surface and strike you as important in my poems, (for, of course, I do not think of troubling you with criticism in detail) you will confer a lasting obligation on me, and one which I shall value so much, that I covet it at a distance. I do not pretend to any extraordinary meekness under criticism, and it is possible enough that I might not be altogether obedient to yours. But with my high respect for your power in your Art and for your experience as an artist, it would be quite impossible for me to hear a general observation of yours on what appear to you my master-faults, without being the better for it hereafter in some way. I ask for only a sentence or two of general observation—and I do not ask even for *that*, so as to tease you—but in the humble, low voice, which is so excellent a thing in women—particularly when they go a-begging !

The most frequent general criticism I receive, is, I think, upon the style,—‘if I would but change my style !’ But that is an objection (isn’t it?) to the writer bodily ? Buffon says, and every sincere writer must feel, that ‘*Le style c’est l’homme*;’ a fact, however, scarcely calculated to lessen the objection with certain critics.

“ Is it indeed true that I was so near to the pleasure and honour of making your acquaintance ? and can it be true that you look back upon the lost opportunity with any regret ? But—you know—if you had entered the ‘crypt,’ you might have caught cold, or been tired to death, and wished yourself ‘a thousand miles off ;’ which would have been worse than travelling them. It is not my interest, however, to put such thoughts in your head about its being ‘all for the best ;’ and I would rather hope (as I do) that what I lost by one chance I may recover by some future one. Winters shut me up as they do the dormouse’s eyes ; in the spring, *we shall see* : and I am so much better that I seem turning round to the outward world again. And in the mean time I have learnt to know your voice, not merely from the poetry but from the kindness in it. Mr. Kenyon often speaks of you—dear Mr. Kenyon !—who most unspeakably, or only unspeakably with tears in my eyes,—has been my friend and helper, and my book’s friend and helper ! critic and sympathizer, true friend of all hours ! You know him well enough, I think, to understand that I must be grateful to him.

“ I am writing too much,—and notwithstanding that I am writing too much, I will write of one thing more. I will say that I am your debtor, not only for this cordial letter and for all the pleasure which came with it, but in

other ways, and those the highest : and I will say that while I live to follow this divine art poetry, in proportion to my love for it and my devotion to it, I must be a devout admirer and student of your works. This is in my heart to say to you—and I say it.

“And, for the rest, I am proud to remain,

“Your obliged and faithful,

“ELIZABETH B. BARRETT.

“Robert Browning, Esq.,
“New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey.”

So this memorable correspondence begins, and beyond hope and belief the door of the quiet room was once for all thrown open. It is, indeed, thrown open for us too. Compared with the clear light, the growing intimacy, with which we see Elizabeth Barrett henceforward, all we have had up to now has been nothing but stray echoes and glimpses. As one lingers on the verge of all this brightness, one is tempted to dwell on several thoughts, of which the first must be this : What was it exactly that impelled Robert Browning, the reticent, the self-sufficient, the detached man of the world, to throw himself so singly and completely into correspondence with this hidden stranger ? The letter that heads this chapter is the letter of a man irresistibly drawn out of himself by a warm personal admiration ; it is more than an intellectual and more than a literary charm which he feels ; he is somehow affected as if by the very presence of the author of “this great living poetry.” It is too soon to insist on this, perhaps : yet already the note is there. Browning, who had so few close personal relations with people, who had

no intimate friends, and at thirty-three had never been in love,—Browning is now touched as he had not been before. As for Miss Barrett, it must have been a thrill for her, too, to hear this rich exuberant voice breaking in on the professional enthusiasm of the Hornes and the Chorleys and the rest of her admirers. She responds to it eagerly; on both sides letter at once follows letter, at the shortest intervals, both trying to show what they are like, both trying to catch sight of the other. Miss Barrett opens her very next letter with a shrewd piece of confession.

“When I had an Italian master, years ago, he told me that there was an unpronounceable English word which absolutely expressed me, and which he would say in his own tongue, as he could not in mine—‘*testa lunga*.’ Of course, the signor meant *headlong*!—and now I have had enough to tame me, and might be expected to stand still in my stall. But you see I do not. Headlong I was at first, and headlong I continue—precipitously rushing forward through all manner of nettles and briars instead of keeping the path; guessing at the meaning of unknown words instead of looking into the dictionary—tearing open letters, and never untying a string—and expecting everything to be done in a minute, and the thunder to be as quick as the lightning. And so, at your half word I flew at the whole one, with all its possible consequences, and wrote what you read.”

She keeps, on the whole, to literary regions, and in an early letter speaks finely of the joy of writing—

“I began in thinking and wondering what sort of

artistic constitution you had, being determined, as you may observe (with a sarcastic smile at the impertinence), to set about knowing as much as possible of you immediately. Then you spoke of your ‘gentle audience’ (*you began*), and I, who know that you have not one but many enthusiastic admirers—the ‘fit and few’ in the intense meaning—yet not the *diffused* fame which will come to you presently, wrote on, down the margin of the subject, till I parted from it altogether. But, after all, we are on the proper matter of sympathy. And after all, and after all that has been said and mused upon the ‘natural ills,’ the anxiety, and wearing out experienced by the true artist,—is not the *good* immeasurably greater than the *evil*? Is it not great good, and great joy? For my part, I wonder sometimes—I surprise myself wondering—how without such an object and purpose of life, people find it worth while to live at all. And, for happiness—why, my only idea of happiness, as far as my personal enjoyment is concerned, (but I have been straightened in some respects and in comparison with the majority of livers!) lies deep in poetry and its associations. And then, the escape from pangs of heart and bodily weakness—when you throw off *yourself*—what you feel to be *yourself*—into another atmosphere and into other relations where your life may spread its wings out new, and gather on every separate plume a brightness from the sun of the sun! Is it possible that imaginative writers should be so fond of depreciating and lamenting over their own destiny? Possible, certainly—but reasonable, not at all—and grateful, less than anything!”.

She questions him eagerly about his own work and

literary schemes, and is told of a new drama, just begun, about a golden-hearted Moor named Luria—is told, too, of another poem, also just begun, in which he is trying to speak out with his own voice, instead of eternally putting words into the mouths of other people ; “ yet I don’t think I shall let *you* hear, after all,” he says, “ the savage things about popes and imaginative religions that I must say ; ” and, indeed, after all he let no one hear—the poem never was written. And she, too, writes of her own work—the heart-breaking labour she was imposing on herself, the dreariest task that a writer can submit to—that of taking up again old work—and of the idea, already germinating in her mind, of the “ novel-poem ” that took shape years afterwards in “ Aurora Leigh.”

“ But my chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem—a poem as completely modern as ‘ Geraldine’s Courtship,’ running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, ‘ where angels fear to tread ; ’ and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly. That is my intention. It is not mature enough yet to be called a plan. I am waiting for a story, and I won’t take one, because I want to make one, and I like to make my own stories, because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment.

“ Who told me of your skulls and spiders ? Why, couldn’t I know it without being told ? Did Cornelius Agrippa know nothing without being told ? Mr. Horne never spoke it to my ears—(I never saw him face to face in

my life, although we have corresponded for long and long), and he never wrote it to my eyes. Perhaps he does not know that I know it. Well, then ! if I were to say that *I heard it from you yourself*, how would you answer ? *And it was so.* Why, are you not aware that these are the days of mesmerism and clairvoyance ? Are you an infidel ? I have believed in your skulls for the last year, for my part.

“ And I have some sympathy in your habit of feeling for chairs and tables. I remember, when I was a child and wrote poems in little clasped books, I used to kiss the books and put them away tenderly because I had been happy near them, and take them out by turns when I was going from home, to cheer them by the change of air and the pleasure of the new place. This, not for the sake of the verses written in them, and not for the sake of writing more verses in them, but from pure gratitude. Other books I used to treat in a like manner—and to talk to the trees and the flowers, was a natural inclination—but between me and that time, the cypresses grow thick and dark.”

Very soon she drops into completer intimacy than this, and writes with a fine grave dignity of herself, in a letter of which part has already been quoted.

“ And what you say of society draws me on to many comparative thoughts of your life and mine. You seem to have drunken of the cup of life full, with the sun shining on it. I have lived only inwardly ; or with *sorrow*, for a strong emotion. Before this seclusion of my illness, I was secluded still, and there are few of the youngest women in the world who have not seen more, heard more, known more,

of society, than I, who am scarcely to be called young now. I grew up in the country—had no social opportunities, had my heart in books and poetry, and my experience in reveries. My sympathies drooped towards the ground like an untrained honeysuckle—and but for *one*, in my own house—but of this I cannot speak. It was a lonely life, growing green like the grass around it. Books and dreams were what I lived in—and domestic life only seemed to buzz gently around, like the bees about the grass. And so time passed and passed—and afterwards, when my illness came and I seemed to stand at the edge of the world with all done, and no prospect (as appeared at one time) of ever passing the threshold of one room again; why then, I turned to thinking with some bitterness (after the greatest sorrow of my life had given me room and time to breathe) that I had stood blind in this temple I was about to leave—that I had seen no Human nature, that my brothers and sisters of the earth were *names* to me, that I had beheld no great mountain or river, nothing in fact. I was as a man dying who had not read Shakespeare, and it was too late! do you understand? And do you also know what a disadvantage this ignorance is to my art? Why, if I live on and yet do not escape from this seclusion, do you not perceive that I labour under signal disadvantages—that I am, in a manner, as a *blind poet*? Certainly, there is a compensation to a degree. I have had much of the inner life, and from the habit of self-consciousness and self-analysis, I make great guesses at Human nature in the main. But how willingly I would as a poet exchange some of this lumbering, ponderous, helpless knowledge of books, for some experience of life and man, for some . . .

"But all grumbling is a vile thing. We should all thank God for our measures of life, and think them enough for each of us. I write so, that you may not mistake what I wrote before in relation to society, although you do not see from my point of view ; and that you may understand what I mean fully when I say, that I have lived all my chief *joys*, and indeed nearly all emotions that go warmly by that name and relate to myself personally, in poetry and in poetry alone."

When, after this degree of intimacy, she drops back to literary talk, to questions about the books he has read and the places he has seen, he protests, in a characteristically cryptic letter, at the idea that she is "making conversation ;" the metaphors and illustrations are bewildering to disentangle, and the phraseology advances and recoils and twists upon itself, the worst knots being cut by summary dots and dashes, till the brain spins at the work of following the thread ; but this much at least is clear, that already, before he has so much as seen her, the thought of her has touched him too deeply to allow him to talk without impatience of books and travel and impersonal things. There is no doubt that it was a strange frame of mind for an exceptionally balanced and orderly man. To say that he was a poet is no explanation ; because, with all his insight, he was not a man on whom people made vivid personal impressions. He was an onlooker, very shrewd and generous in appreciation, but one whose heart was not easily drawn into the web of other people's lives. Yet for all this, we clearly see him, in the letters of these early weeks, trembling on the verge of real passion, all ready to

lavish his love upon a voice—and one, too, that still refused to admit him.

But spring had arrived now, and in every letter he kept it delicately before her that he was only waiting for a word to bid him come. He was living with his parents at New Cross, a simple, free life, occupied only with his poetry, and often walking into London to see his friends. He waited eagerly for leave to call at Wimpole Street. At last she writes, four months after they have begun to correspond—

“Well!—but this is to prove that I am not mistrustful, and to say, that if you care to come to see me you can come; and that it is my gain (as I feel it to be) and not yours, whenever you do come. You will not talk of having come afterwards I know, because although I am ‘fast bound’ to see one or two persons this summer (besides yourself, whom I receive of choice and willingly) I *cannot* admit visitors in a general way—and putting the question of health quite aside, it would be unbecoming to lie here on the sofa and make a company-show of an infirmity, and hold a beggar’s hat for sympathy. I should blame it in another woman—and the sense of it has had its weight with me sometimes.

“For the rest, . . . when you write, that *I* do not know how you would value, etc., *nor yourself quite*, to touch very accurately on the truth . . . and *so* accurately in the last clause, that to read it made me smile ‘tant bien que mal.’ Certainly you cannot ‘quite know,’ or know at all, whether the least straw of pleasure can go to you from knowing me otherwise than on this paper—and *I*, for my part, ‘quite know’ my own honest impression, dear Mr.

Browning, that none is likely to go to you. There is nothing to see in me ; nor to hear in me—I never learnt to talk as you do in London ; although I can admire that brightness of carved speech in Mr. Kenyon and others. If my poetry is worth anything to any eye, it is the flower of me. I have lived most and been most happy in it, and so it has all my colours ; the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground and the dark. And if I write all this egotism, . . . it is for shame ; and because I feel ashamed of having made a fuss about what is not worth it ; and because you are extravagant in caring so for a permission, which will be nothing to you afterwards. Not that I am not touched by your caring so at all ! I am deeply touched now ; and presently, . . . I shall understand ! Come then. There will be truth and simplicity for you in any case ; and a friend. And do not answer this—I do not write it as a fly trap for compliments. Your spider would scorn me for it too much.”

These doubts and questionings and protestations of unworthiness which fly to and fro between them would not seem to be the best preparation for an unembarrassed acquaintance. There was the danger of concentrating too much attention, too much piled-up expectation, on the single point of their first meeting. But at last the great date and hour were fixed, and Miss Barrett’s letter of May 17 is endorsed on the envelope by Browning, “ Monday, May 20, 1845, 3-4½ p.m.”

Between three and half-past four on that day Miss Barrett watched and talked to a man of thirty-three,

with a shrewd bright face, and strong, virile tones. His conversation was profuse and straightforward and vehement, not particularly subtle, without poetic or romantic flavour, but revealing a central core of strength and soundness, a kind of resonance and well-tempered vitality in the man's mind. Elizabeth Barrett, on her guarded sofa, felt herself shaken by an ardour to which she had hitherto been a stranger. She was interested and stimulated ; indeed, the impression of his presence was so strong that it dominated her after he had left, and the next morning she told her father that it was extraordinary how the idea of him still beset her ; it haunted her like a persecution. She hardly felt as if her thoughts were her own under his masterful eyes ; she was almost frightened of his power ; though with how little idea of what happened afterwards is shown by her light words to her father.

And on his side, what did he find when he arrived, brimming with expectation, and was taken upstairs to see her at last ? There would be a crudity in looking too closely ; but this much is obvious, that her presence poured the one drop into the cup of his eagerness that was needed to make it overflow. All he did at once, however, was to write a decorous little note that same evening, hoping that she had not been tired, and that he had not stayed too long or talked too loud. To this she sent a reassuring letter, full of her fear that he should see her, not as she felt herself to be, but glorified by his own imagination.

“It is hard for you to understand what my mental position is after the peculiar experience I have suffered, and

what τὶ ἐμοὶ καὶ σοὶ a sort of feeling is irrepressible from me to you, when, from the height of your brilliant happy sphere, you ask, as you did ask for personal intercourse with me. What words but ‘kindness’ . . . but ‘gratitude’ —but I will not in any case be *unkind* and *ungrateful*, and do what is displeasing to you. And let us both leave the subject with the words—because we perceive in it from different points of view ; we stand on the black and white sides of the shield ; and there is no coming to a conclusion.”

Next morning to her undisguised dismay she received a letter from him of which the tenour can be guessed from her answer.

“ Friday Evening.
[Post-mark, May 24, 1845.]

“ I intended to write to you last night and this morning, and could not,—you do not know what pain you give me in speaking so wildly. And if I disobey you, my dear friend, in speaking, (I for my part) of your wild speaking, I do it, not to displease you, but to be in my own eyes, and before God, a little more worthy, or less unworthy, of a generosity from which I recoil from instinct and at the first glance, yet conclusively ; and because my silence would be the most disloyal of all means of expression, in reference to it. Listen to me then in this. You have said some intemperate things . . . fancies,—which you will not say over again, nor unsay, but *forget at once*, and *for ever*, *having said at all* ; and which (so) will die out between *you and me alone*, like a misprint between you and the printer. And this you will do *for my sake* who am your friend (and you have none truer)—and this I ask, because it is a condition

necessary to our future liberty of intercourse. You remember—surely you do—that I am in the most exceptional of positions ; and that, just *because of it*, I am able to receive you as I did on Tuesday ; and that, for me to listen to ‘unconscious exaggerations,’ is as unbecoming to the humilities of my position, as unpropitious (which is of more consequence) to the prosperities of yours. Now, if there should be one word of answer attempted to this ; or of reference ; *I must not . . . I will not see you again*—and you will justify me later in your heart. So for my sake you will not say it—I think you will not—and spare me the sadness of having to break through an intercourse just as it is promising pleasure to me ; to me who have so many sadnesses and so few pleasures. You will !—and I need not be uneasy—and I shall owe you that tranquillity, as one gift of many. For, that I have much to receive from you in all the free gifts of thinking, teaching, master-spirits, . . . *that*, I know !—it is my own praise that I appreciate you, as none can more. Your influence and help in poetry will be full of good and gladness to me—for with many to love me in this house, there is no one to judge me . . . *now*. Your friendship and sympathy will be dear and precious to me all my life, if you indeed leave them with me so long or so little. Your mistakes in me . . . which *I* cannot mistake (—and which have humbled me by too much honouring—) I put away gently, and with grateful tears in my eyes ; because *all that hail* will beat down and spoil crowns, as well as ‘blossoms.’ ”

The letter in question was presently destroyed, and is now the only one missing from the series ; but it is easy to

imagine the ardour and wonder that had broken out in it—the torrent of feeling in the man who had hitherto lived a separate life of his own, watching people in a mirror—and it is just as possible for a sociable and talkative man to do that as for the Lady of Shalott,—and who now had been profoundly stirred by realizing that another life had come into contact with his own, making him suddenly aware of a new possession that he had lacked before. He had reached that brilliant intermediate stage, which is not quite love, and yet rims everything with new colours, like trees seen through a prism ; and the beauty and excitement of it was more than he could keep back. And it is no less easy to understand the recoil of horror with which the other answered it. She did not know the charm of her shy brightness, like that of some soft brown wood-bird, or the sense of womanliness and nobility which her presence diffused. She merely saw a faded invalid, who had done with the world, face to face with a brilliant man, younger than herself, and with a rich future before him, who gazed at her through a kind of imaginative dream, from which he must very soon awake. And so she wrote, in real consternation at the idea of this friendship being lost to her, and determined to repair his mistake as quickly and effectively as she could.

Browning's answer to this was hardly worthy of him, though to be sure it was not an easy position. A prompt retreat was necessary, if he was not to lose sight of her altogether ; and to retreat gracefully under the circumstances was no doubt difficult. But with every allowance made, it is hard to excuse the letter of tortured explanations and disingenuous protests which followed, and from which all

that emerges clearly is his assertion that she has taken his letter too seriously, and that he did not mean so much by it as she thinks. His eager disclaimer had the effect of putting her into an intolerably false position, and wounding her self-respect. Nothing but her own perfect simplicity could have extricated her or made it possible for their friendship to continue without embarrassment ; and see with what exquisite dignity, with no solemnity or parade, she puts their relations straight—

“Sunday.
[May 25, 1845.]

“I owe you the most humble of apologies, dear Mr. Browning, for having spent so much solemnity on so simple a matter, and I hasten to pay it ; confessing at the same time (as why should I not ?) that I am quite as much ashamed of myself as I ought to be, which is not a little. You will find it difficult to believe me, perhaps, when I assure you that I never made such a mistake (I mean of over-seriousness to indefinite compliments), no, never in my life before—indeed my sisters have often jested with me (in matters of which they were cognizant) on my supernatural indifference to the superlative degree in general, as if it meant nothing in grammar. . . . I may say however, in a poor justice to myself, that I wrote what I wrote so unfortunately, *through reverence for you*, and not at all from vanity on my own account . . . although I do feel palpably while I write these words here and now, that I might as well leave them unwritten ; for that no man of the world who ever lived in the world (not even

you) could be expected to believe them, though said, sung, and sworn."

So the path is cleared for the moment; Browning is allowed to call again the following week, and the succession of letters and visits goes lightly forward. Even so, however, there are continual mischances. She cannot acquiesce in his admiration and reverence for her; his feelings continue, as he writes, to leap out in small words of gratitude, all of which have to be collected and returned with many protestations upon his hands. The *perpetual shuttle-cock* of self-depreciation which is thus set going might to an unsympathetic reader appear a little tedious. But the perfect genuineness of their humility has a certain beauty of its own; and there is always a sweet dignity in the way in which she gently insists on meeting him upon her own terms.

"And while you were doing this for me, you thought it unkind of me not to write to you; yes, and you think me at this moment the very princess of apologies and excuses and depreciations and all the rest of the small family of distrust—or of hypocrisy . . . who knows? Well! but you are wrong . . . wrong . . . to think so; and you will let me say one word to show where you are wrong—not for you to controvert, . . . because it must relate to myself especially, and lies beyond your cognizance, and is something which I *must know best* after all. And it is, . . . that you persist in putting me into a false position, with respect to *fixing days* and the like, and in making me feel somewhat as I did when I was a child, and Papa used to put me up on the chimney-piece and exhort me to stand up straight

like a hero, which I did, straighter and straighter, and then suddenly ‘was ’ware’ (as we say in the ballads) of the walls’ growing alive behind me and extending two stony hands to push me down that frightful precipice to the rug, where the dog lay . . . dear old Havannah, . . . and where he and I were likely to be dashed to pieces together and mix our uncanonised bones. Now my present false position . . . which is not the chimney-piece’s, . . . is the necessity you provide for me in the shape of my having to name this day, or that day, . . . and of your coming because I name it, and of my having to think and remember that you come because I name it. Through a weakness, perhaps, or morbidness, or one knows not how to define it, I *cannot help* being uncomfortable in having to do this,—it is impossible. Not that I distrust *you*—you are the last in the world I could distrust: and then (although you may be sceptical) I am naturally given to trust . . . to a fault . . . as some say, or to a sin, as some reproach me:—and then again, if I were ever such a distruster, it could not be of *you*. But if you knew me—! I will tell you! if one of my brothers omits coming to this room for two days, . . . I never ask why it happened! if my own father omits coming upstairs to say ‘good night,’ I never say a word; and not from indifference. Do try to make out these readings of me as a *dixit Casaubonus*; and don’t throw me down as a corrupt text, nor convict me for an infidel which I am not. On the contrary, I am grateful and happy to believe that you like to come here; and even if you came here as a pure act of charity and pity to me, as long as you *chose to come* I should not be too proud to be grateful and happy still. I

could not be proud to *you*, and I hope you will not fancy such a possibility, which is the most remotest of all."

Looking back on their intercourse from this distance, it is obvious that a friendship in which both found it so difficult to settle down on terms of facile give and take was from the first moment doomed to fail of remaining a friendship merely. They are intently occupied with their relation to each other ; the sudden leap into intimacy gives them so much to do in the way of self-revelation. It is as if they were old friends ; and yet, as they have only known each other a few weeks, all the past threads of their lives are separate, and the whole task of knitting them together is thrown upon them in a hurry. They have years of detachment to make up for day by day. No wonder that his visits at once became established weekly events, and that letters soon began to pour to and fro almost daily. First of all there is their own work to discuss. Very little is heard of hers ; but of "Luria," of the "Soul's Tragedy," of the "Flight of the Duchess," there is much to ask and to be shown and to criticize. Then their health ; and here it is half amusing to notice how the most anxious inquiries are on her side, from the prostrate invalid, who had hardly been out of the house for five years, to the robust young man, sometimes troubled with headaches. Not that he made light of her condition ; indeed, as appears afterwards, when he first saw her he believed her to be suffering from an incurable disease of the spine, which deprived her of all hope of ever standing upright again. He soon learnt his mistake, however ; early in June she announces with pride that she has really been out, even though her ambition to

get as far as the Park was disappointed ; and he rejoices in the signs of her returning strength.

Books of course figure in their letters, though less in his. In many of hers there are fine illuminating pieces of criticism, richly expressed ; like this, which refers to Tennyson's luxurious blank verse on Timbuctoo, which won the Chancellor's medal at Cambridge.

" Friday.

" [Post-mark, June 14, 1845.]

" Yes, the poem *is* too good in certain respects for the prizes given in colleges (when all the pure parsley goes naturally to the rabbits), and has a great deal of beauty here and there in image and expression. Still I do not quite agree with you that it reaches the Tennyson standard any wise ; and for the blank verse, I cannot for a moment think it comparable to one of the grand passages in 'Oenone,' and 'Arthur' and the like. In fact, I seem to hear more in that latter blank verse than you do, . . . to hear not only a 'mighty line' as in Marlowe, but a noble full orbicular wholeness in complete passages—which always struck me as the mystery of music and great peculiarity in Tennyson's versification, inasmuch as he attains to these complete effects without that shifting of the pause practised by the masters, . . . Shelley and others. A 'linked music' in which there are no links !—*that*, you would take to be a contradiction—and yet something like that, my ear has always seemed to perceive ; and I have wondered curiously again and again how there could be so much union and no fastening. Only, of course, it is not model versification—and for dramatic purposes, it must be admitted to be bad."

Here, again, is a fine piece of characterization.

“ Only I should not dare, . . . ever, I think . . . to tell her that I believe women . . . all of us in a mass . . . to have minds of quicker movement, but less power and depth . . . and that we are under your feet, because we can’t stand upon our own. Not that we should either be quite under your feet ! so you are not to be too proud, if you please—and there is certainly some amount of wrong— : but it never will be righted in the manner and to the extent contemplated by certain of our own prophetesses . . . nor ought to be, I hold in intimate persuasion. One woman indeed now alive . . . and only *that* one down all the ages of the world—seems to me to justify for a moment an opposite opinion — that wonderful woman George Sand ; who has something monstrous in combination with her genius, there is no denying at moments (for she has written one book, ‘ Leila,’ which I could not read, though I am not easily turned back), but whom, in her good and evil together, I regard with infinitely more admiration than all other women of genius who are or have been. Such a colossal nature in every way,—with all that breadth and scope of faculty which women want—magnanimous, and loving the truth and loving the people—and with that ‘ hate of hate,’ too, which you extol—so eloquent, and yet earnest as if she were dumb—so full of a living sense of beauty, and of noble blind instincts towards an ideal purity—and so proving a right even in her wrong.”

From all these extracts it must be clear what a far fuller and richer note has come into her writing since

she has begun to correspond with Browning. Partly this was due to the fact that she had now a richer mind to pour her own mind into than she had had before. Browning, with all his characteristic faults, some of them not very pleasant ones, with his streaks of hardness and intellectual arrogance and contemptuousness, had a mind crossed and recrossed with strange recondite threads, woven into a close and sumptuous texture. His letters are like his poems—extraordinary felicities of language sometimes, at others inextricable coagulations of words,—sentences which start off headlong, and die away suddenly in a row of dots, parentheses which rush out at every corner, and trip each other up in universal confusion; not seldom flatly unintelligible; and yet always stuffed and packed with thought. It is not always the finest thought or the most original or most unconventional. But the mental process is always there; and even at its most tormented, it gives his letters a richness of fibre, a sense of there being ever so much more behind them, that makes them extraordinarily interesting reading. It is as if he only had to open a window for a moment, to let hundreds of queer attractive creatures fly crowding out,—so thickly that when he tries to shut the window again he cannot do it without mangling and crushing some of them. Small wonder that Miss Barrett, finding herself suddenly in front of a mind like this, after half a lifetime spent in writing amiably about her books and her poetry, should have risen to meet it with all her still latent genius, infusing a new brilliance into her thought and language. In a less indirect way, too, her letters to him strongly show his influence. His dots and dashes,

his broken sentences, the general informality of his style, make their appearance very soon in her own writing, not to its disadvantage. In earlier days the correctness of her style makes it sometimes rather flat; in this respect, too, she gains in vigour and blood as she writes to Browning.

Week after week, then, all through the summer, he knocked punctually at the door in Wimpole Street, carrying flowers from the garden at New Cross, and was led upstairs, sometimes passing a brother or a sister on the stairs, but making no acquaintance at all with the rest of the family. Like good Mr. Kenyon, in this at least, he was recognized as "Ba's friend," and allowed to pass unchallenged; but the idea that he should be in any way admitted as a general friend of the house was simply inconceivable. Her father was away all day and hardly realized the regularity of his appearance, nor was it Elizabeth's wish that he or any one else should do so. Not that, even if he had, it would have occurred to him that there was "anything between them," as the phrase is; he would have dreamt of no such audacity as that. But from the first she had laid a strict embargo on Browning, as we have seen, against letting any one know of his visits. She was by way of being unable to receive visitors, and what would Horne, what would Chorley, what would all the rest of them have said and thought if they had known that, while keeping them out on that plea, she was regularly admitting a man, whose claim was far more recent, to long and intimate visits? That was the simple origin of the secrecy of their meetings, continued later, of course, for more cogent reasons, and resulting finally

in endless difficulties and small annoyances. But at present all was serene, and Browning even gloried in his matchless secret.

"Indeed," he writes, "though on other grounds I should be all so proud of being known for your friend by everybody, yet there's no denying the deep delight of playing the Eastern Jew's part here in this London—they go about, you know by travel-books, with the tokens of extreme destitution and misery, and steal by blind ways and by-paths to some blank dreary house, one obscure door in it—which being well shut behind them, they grope on through a dark corridor or so, and then, a blaze follows the lifting a curtain or the like, for they are in a palace-hall with fountains and light, and marble and gold, of which the envious are never to dream! And I, too, love to have few friends, and to live alone, and to see you from week to week. Do you not suppose I am grateful?"

That he was allowed to write like this in July, without being immediately taken to task, is a measure of how far they had progressed since May. The barrier she had tried to construct between them after his initial mistake he is steadily abolishing, not by importunities, but by being ready at every chink with his offering of love; so that insensibly, perhaps without her being quite aware of it, the emotional atmosphere between them grows intenser. When he begins a letter, "I shall just say, at the beginning of a note as at the end, I am yours *ever*, and not till summer ends and my nails fall out, and my breath breaks bubbles;" when on the next page he writes, "God

bless you—do not be otherwise than kind to this letter which it cost me pains, great pains, to avoid writing better, as truthfuller—this you get is not the first begun,”—it is clear that that barrier has all but vanished. And her answer now, when she must answer, is this—

“[Post-mark, July 28, 1845.]

“*Sunday.*—I wrote so much yesterday and then went out, not knowing very well how to speak or how to be silent (is it better to-day?) of some expressions of yours . . . and of your interest in me—which are deeply affecting to my feelings—whatever else remains to be said of them. And you know that you make great mistakes, . . . of fennel for hemlock, of four o’clocks for five o’clocks, and of other things of more consequence, one for another; and may not be quite right besides as to my getting well ‘*if I please!*’ . . . which reminds me a little of what Papa says sometimes when he comes into this room unexpectedly and convicts me of having dry toast for dinner, and declares angrily that obstinacy and dry toast have brought me to my present condition, and that if *I pleased* to have porter and beefsteaks instead, I should be as well as ever I was, in a month! . . . But where is the need of talking of it? What I wished to say was this—that if I get better or worse . . . as long as I live and to the last moment of life, I shall remember with an emotion which cannot change its character, all the generous interest and feeling you have spent on me—*wasted* on me, I was going to write—but I would not provoke any answering—and in one obvious sense, it need not be so. I never shall forget these things, my dearest friend; nor remember them more coldly. God’s

goodness!—I believe in it, as in His sunshine here—which makes my head ache a little, while it comes in at the window, and makes most other people gayer—it does *me* good too in a different way. And so, may God bless you! and me in this . . . just this, . . . that I may never have the sense . . . intolerable in the remotest apprehension of it . . . of being, in any way, directly or indirectly, the means of ruffling your smooth path by so much as one of my flint-stones! In the mean time you do not tire me indeed even when you go later or sooner . . . and I do not tire myself even when I write longer and duller letters to you (if the last is possible) than the one I am ending now . . . as the most grateful (leave me that word) of your friends."

A very few weeks more and she takes him into supreme confidence, showing him the hardest and bitterest things of her life, allowing his right to share the sorrow of which she could never speak. Thus the long extract that follows marks a turning-point; she admits him to a guarded fortress from which every one else is excluded, and so sets him once for all in a unique place among her friends. They have been talking, at one of his visits, of her father, and she has let him see something of the strange autocracy under which she lived. That same evening she writes—

“[Post-mark, August 25, 1845.]

“And then the next thing to write off my mind is . . . that you must not, you must not, make an unjust opinion out of what I said to-day. I have been uncomfortable since, lest you should—and perhaps it would have been better if I had not said it apart from all context in that

way ; only that you could not long be a friend of mine without knowing and seeing what so lies on the surface. But then . . . as far as I am concerned, . . . no one cares less for a ‘will’ than I do (and this though I never had one . . . in clear opposition to your theory which holds generally nevertheless) for a will in the common things of life. Every now and then there must of course be a crossing and vexation—but in one’s mere pleasures and fantasies, one would rather be crossed and vexed a little than vex a person one loves . . . and it is possible to get used to the harness and run easily in it at last ; and there is a side-world to hide one’s thoughts in, and ‘carpet-work’ to be immoral on, in spite of Mrs. Jameson . . . and the word ‘literature’ has, with me, covered a good deal of liberty, as you must see . . . real liberty which is never inquired into—and it has happened throughout my life by an accident (as far as anything is accident) that my own sense of right and happiness on any important point of overt action, has never run contrariwise to the way of obedience required of me . . . while in things not exactly *overt*, I and all of us are apt to act sometimes up to the limit of our means of acting, with shut doors and windows, and no waiting for cognizance or permission. Ah—and that last is the worst of it all, perhaps ! to be forced into concealments from the heart naturally nearest to us ; and forced away from the natural source of counsel and strength !—and then, the disingenuousness—the cowardice—the ‘vices of slaves’!—and every one you see . . . all my brothers . . . constrained *bodily* into submission . . . apparent submission, at least . . . by that worst and most dishonouring of necessities, the necessity of *living*, every one of them all, except myself,

being dependent in money matters on the inflexible will . . . do you see? But what you do *not* see, what you *cannot* see, is the deep, tender affection behind and below all those patriarchal ideas of governing grown-up children 'in the way they *must* go!' and there never was (under the strata) a truer affection in a father's heart . . . no, nor a worthier heart in itself . . . a heart loyaller and purer, and more compelling to gratitude and reverence, than his, as I see it! The evil is in the system—and he simply takes it to be his duty to rule, and to make happy according to his own views of the propriety of happiness—he takes it to be his duty to rule like the Kings of Christendom, by divine right. But he loves us through and through it—and *I*, for one, love *him!* and when, five years ago, I lost what I loved best in the world beyond comparison and rivalry . . . far better than himself as he knew . . . for every one who knew *me* could not choose but know what was my first and chiefest affection . . . when I lost *that*, . . . I felt that he stood the nearest to me on the closed grave . . . or by the unclosing sea . . . I do not know which nor could ask. And I will tell you that not only he has been kind and patient and forbearing to me through the tedious trial of this illness (far more trying to standers-by than you have an idea of, perhaps), but that he was generous and forbearing in that hour of bitter trial, and never reproached me as he might have done and as my own soul has not spared—never once said to me then or since, that if it had not been for *me*, the crown of his house would not have fallen. He *never did* . . . and he might have said it, and more—and I could have answered nothing. Nothing, except that I had paid my own price—and that

the price I paid was greater than his *loss* . . . his !! For see how it was ; and how, ‘not with my hand but heart.’ I was the cause or occasion of that misery—and though not with the intention of my heart but with its weakness, yet the *occasion*, any way !

“They sent me down, you know, to Torquay—Dr. Chambers saying that I could not live a winter in London. The worst—what people call the worst—was apprehended for me at that time. So I was sent down with my sister to my aunt there—and he, my brother whom I loved so, was sent too, to take us there and return. And when the time came for him to leave me, *I*, to whom he was the dearest of friends and brothers in one . . . the only one of my family who . . . well, but I cannot write of these things ; and it is enough to tell you that he was above us all, better than us all, and kindest and noblest and dearest to *me*, beyond comparison, any comparison, as I said—and when the time came for him to leave me, *I*, weakened by illness, could not master my spirits or drive back my tears—and my aunt kissed them away instead of reproving me as she should have done ; and said that *she* would take care that I should not be grieved . . . *she*! . . . and so she sate down and wrote a letter to Papa to tell him that he would ‘break my heart’ if he persisted in calling away my brother—as if hearts were broken *so*! I have thought bitterly since that my heart did not break for a good deal more than *that*! And Papa’s answer was—burnt into me, as with fire, it is—that ‘under such circumstances he did not refuse to suspend his purpose, but that he considered it to be *very wrong in me to exact such a thing*.’ So there was no separation *then*: and month after month passed—and some-

times I was better and sometimes worse—and the medical men continued to say that they would not answer for my life . . . they ! if I were agitated—and so there was no more talk of a separation. And once *he* held my hand, . . . how I remember ! and said that he ‘loved me better than them all, and that he *would not* leave me . . . till I was well,’ he said ! how I remember *that* ! And ten days from that day the boat had left the shore which never returned ; never—and he *had* left me ! gone ! For three days we waited—and I hoped while I could—oh, that awful agony of three days ! And the sun shone as it shines to-day, and there was no more wind than now ; and the sea under the windows was like this paper for smoothness—and my sisters drew the curtains back that I might see for myself how smooth the sea was, and how it could hurt nobody—and other boats came back one by one.

“Remember how you wrote in your ‘Gismond’—

“‘ What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine’s whole
Strength on it ? No more says the soul ; ’

and you never wrote anything which *lived* with me more than *that*. It is such a dreadful truth. But you knew it for truth, I hope, by your genius, and not by such proof as mine—I, who could not speak or shed a tear, but lay for weeks and months half conscious, half unconscious, with a wandering mind, and too near to God under the crushing of His hand, to pray at all. I expiated all my weak tears before, by not being able to shed then one tear—and yet they were forbearing—and no voice said, ‘ You have done this.’

"Do not notice what I have written to you, my dearest friend. I have never said so much to a living being—I never *could* speak or write of it. I asked no question from the moment when my last hope went: and since then, it has been impossible for me to speak what was in me. I have borne to do it to-day and to you, but perhaps if you were to write—so do not let this be noticed between us again—*do not!* And besides, there is no need! I do not reproach myself with such acrid thoughts as I had once—I *know* that I would have died ten times over for *him*, and that therefore, though it was wrong of me to be weak, and I have suffered for it and shall learn by it, I hope, *remorse* is not precisely the word for me—not at least in its full sense. Still, you will comprehend from what I have told you how the spring of life must have seemed to break within me *then*; and how natural it has been for me to loathe the living on—and to lose faith (even without the loathing), to lose faith in myself . . . which I have done on some points utterly. It is not from the cause of illness —no. And you will comprehend, too, that I have strong reasons for being grateful to the forbearance . . . It would have been *cruel*, you think, to reproach me. Perhaps so! yet the kindness and patience of the desisting from reproach are positive things all the same."

This last mark of confidence is enough. Part of a letter of his and two answers of hers will show that they have reached an understanding at last,—not the final acquiescence, but the complete admission of what she is to him, and of what he might have been to her if circumstances had been different.

"I believe in *you* absolutely, utterly—I believe that when you bade me, that time, be silent—that such was your bidding, and I was silent—dare I say I think you did not know at that time the power I have over myself, that I could sit and speak and listen as I have done since? Let me say now—*this only once*—that I loved you from my soul, and gave you my life, so much of it as you would take,—and all that is *done*, not to be altered now: it was, in the nature of the proceeding, wholly independent of any return on your part. I will not think on extremes you might have resorted to; as it is, the assurance of your friendship, the intimacy to which you admit me, *now*, make the truest, deepest joy of my life—a joy I can never think fugitive while we are in life, because I KNOW, as to me, I could not willingly displease you,—while, as to you, your goodness and understanding will always see to the bottom of involuntary or ignorant faults—always help me to correct them. I have done now. If I thought you were like other women I have known, I should say so much!—but—(my first and last word—I *believe* in *you*!)—what you could and would give me, of your affection, you would give nobly and simply and as a giver—you would not need that I tell you—(*tell* you!)—what would be supreme happiness to me in the event—however distant—

"I repeat . . . I call on your justice to remember, on your intelligence to believe . . . that this is merely a more precise stating the *first* subject; to put an end to any possible misunderstanding—to prevent your henceforth believing that because I *do not write*, from thinking too deeply of you, I am offended, vexed, etc., etc. I will never recur to this, nor shall you see the least difference in my

manner next Monday : it is, indeed, always before me . . . how I know nothing of you and yours. But I think I ought to have spoken when I did—and to speak clearly . . . or more clearly what I do, as it is my pride and duty to fall back, now, on the feeling with which I have been in the mean time—Yours—God bless you—

“ R. B.”

The next day she writes—

“ Sunday.
“ [August 31, 1845.]

“ I did not think you were angry—I never said so. But you might reasonably have been wounded a little, if you had suspected me of blaming you for any bearing of yours towards myself ; and this was the amount of my fear—or rather hope . . . since I conjectured most that you were not well. And after all you did think . . . do think . . . that in some way or for some moment I blamed you, disbelieved you, distrusted you—or why this letter ? How have I provoked this letter ? Can I forgive myself for having even seemed to have provoked it ? and will you believe me that if for the past’s sake you sent it, it was unnecessary, and if for the future’s, irrelevant ? Which I say from no want of sensibility to the words of it—your words always make themselves felt—but in fulness of purpose not to suffer you to hold to words because they have been said, nor to say them as if to be holden by them. Why, if a thousand more such words were said by you to me, how could they operate upon the future or present, supposing me to choose to keep the possible modification of

your feelings, as a probability, in my sight and yours ? Can you help my sitting with the doors all open if I think it right ? I do attest to you—while I trust you, as you must see, in word and act, and while I am confident that no human being ever stood higher or purer in the eyes of another, than you do in mine,—that you would still stand high and remain unalterably my friend, if the probability in question became a fact, as now at this moment. And this I must say, since you have said other things : and this alone, which *I* have said, concerns the future, I remind you earnestly.

“My dearest friend—you have followed the most *generous* of impulses in your whole bearing to me, and I have recognized and called by its name, in my heart, each one of them. Yet I cannot help adding that, of us two, yours has not been quite the hardest part . . . I mean, to a generous nature like your own, to which every sort of nobleness comes easily. Mine has been more difficult—and I have sunk under it again and again : and the sinking and the effort to recover the duty of a lost position, may have given me an appearance of vacillation and lightness, unworthy at least of *you*, and perhaps of both of us. Notwithstanding which appearance, it was right and just (only just) of you, to believe in me—in my truth—because I have never failed to you in it, nor been capable of *such* failure : the thing I have said, I have meant . . . always : and in things I have not said, the silence has had a reason somewhere different perhaps from where you looked for it. And this brings me to complaining that you, who profess to believe in me, do yet obviously believe that it was only merely silence, which I required of you on one occasion—

and that if I had ‘known your power over yourself,’ I should not have minded . . . no! In other words you believe of me that I was thinking just of my own (what shall I call it for a motive base and small enough?) my own scrupulousness . . . freedom from embarrassment! of myself in the least of me; in the tying of my shoestrings, say!—so much and no more! Now, this is so wrong, as to make me impatient sometimes in feeling it to be your impression: I asked for silence—but *also* and chiefly for the putting away of . . . you know very well what I asked for. And this was sincerely done, I attest to you. You wrote once to me . . . oh, long before May and the day we met: that you ‘had been so happy, you should be now justified to yourself in taking any step most hazardous to the happiness of your life’—but if you were justified, could *I* be therefore justified in abetting such a step,—the step of wasting, in a sense, your best feelings . . . of emptying your water-gourds into the sand? What I thought then I think now—just what any third person, knowing you, would think, I think and feel. I thought, too, at first, that the feeling on your part was a mere generous impulse, likely to expand itself in a week perhaps. It affects me and has affected me, very deeply, more than I dare attempt to say, that you should persist *so*—and if sometimes I have felt, by a sort of instinct, that after all you would not go on to persist, and that (being a man, you know) you might mistake, a little unconsciously, the strength of your own feeling; you ought not to be surprised; when I felt it was more advantageous and happier for you that it should be so. *In any case*, I shall never regret my own share in the events of this summer, and your friendship will be dear

to me to the last. You know I told you so—not long since. And as to what you say otherwise, you are right in thinking that I would not hold by unworthy motives in avoiding to speak what you had any claim to hear. But what could I speak that would not be unjust to you? Your life! if you gave it to me and I put my whole heart into it; what should I put but anxiety and more sadness than you were born to? What could I give you, which it would not be ungenerous to give? Therefore we must leave this subject—and I must trust you to leave it without one word more; (too many have been said already—but I could not let your letter pass quite silently . . . as if I had nothing to do but to receive all as matter of course *so!*) while you may well trust *me* to remember to my life's end, as the grateful remember; and to feel, as those do who have felt sorrow (for where these pits are dug, the water will stand), the full price of your regard. May God bless you, my dearest friend. I shall send this letter after I have seen you, and hope you may not have expected to hear sooner.

“Ever yours,
“E. B. B.”

The following is from a letter of a few days later:—

“And so if you are wise and would be happy (and you have excellent practical sense after all, and should exercise it), you must leave me—these thoughts of me, I mean . . . for if we might not be true friends for ever, I should have less courage to say the other truth. But we may be friends always . . . and cannot be so separated, that your happiness, in the knowledge of it, will not increase mine. And

if you will be persuaded by me, as you say, you will be persuaded *thus . . .* and consent to take a resolution and force your mind at once into another channel. Perhaps I might bring you reasons of the class which you tell me ‘would silence you for ever.’ I might certainly tell you that my own father, if he knew that you had written to me *so*, and that I had answered you—*so*, even, would not forgive me at the end of ten years—and this, from none of the causes mentioned by me here and in no disrespect to your name and your position . . . though he does not over-value poetry even in his daughter, and is apt to take the world’s measures of the means of life . . . but for the singular reason that he never *does* tolerate in his family (sons or daughters) the development of one class of feelings. Such an objection I could not bring to you of my own will—it rang hollow in my ears—perhaps I thought even too little of it :—and I brought to you what I thought much of, and cannot cease to think much of equally. Worldly thoughts, these are not all, nor have been: there need be no soiling of the heart with any such:—and I will say, in reply to some words of yours, that you cannot despise the gold and gauds of the world more than I do, and should do even if I found a use for them. And if I *wished* to be very poor, in the world’s sense of poverty, I *could not*, with three or four hundred a year of which no living will can dispossess me. And is it not the chief good of money, the being free from the need of thinking of it? It seems so to me.

“The obstacles, then, are of another character, and the stronger for being so. Believe that I am grateful to you —*how* grateful, cannot be shown in words nor even in

tears . . . grateful enough to be truthful in all ways. You know I might have hidden myself from you—but I would not; and by the truth told of myself, you may believe in the earnestness with which I tell the other truths—of you . . . and of this subject. The subject will not bear consideration—it breaks in our hands. But that God is stronger than we, cannot be a bitter thought to you, but a holy thought . . . while He lets me, as much as I can be any one's, be only yours.

“E. B. B.”

By this time it was late summer, and all through the long hot months she had been gradually gaining strength, taking tentative walks and drives, and living a little more in the outer life than she had done for years. The question arose, was she to run the risk of losing the ground she had gained by facing the English winter? There had been talk in July of Alexandria or Malta as a possible refuge: to which idea Browning had retorted, “Alexandria! Well, and may I not as easily ask leave to come ‘tomorrow at the muezzin’ as next Wednesday at three?” As the weeks went on it was thought that Italy would serve the purpose, and finally her doctor gave a positive decree for Pisa. He decided that a winter there would give her the chance of confirming her recovery, and at once Browning began scheming to follow her there. Through September her plans wavered continually, not from any want of determination on her part, but because she was now confronted with the disheartening idea, daily confirmed, that in spite of everything that pointed to the plan, her father would refuse his sanction to it. This

cruel revelation of what could only be called by the plain name of selfishness, laid a cold hand upon her heart under which she cowered and shrank. It was a disappointment in her father's love for her all the more intense that she could not be surprised. She understood her father through and through ; she loved him, and now had to face the final proof that his love for her was less to him than the gratification of his sense of authority. She learned at this time that furthest refinement of pain which comes of seeing some well-loved spirit betraying the last stronghold of one's trust. Nearly every allowance, every forgiveness is possible, if not easy ; but only on condition of being able to make some single reservation—to say, “If it came to that last trial, at least then I should not be disappointed.” And then when the last trial comes, and brings the last disappointment with it, it is a further step of grief to realize that the knowledge brings no surprise. The possibility that such would be the end after all has been an intuition all along, only never acknowledged, but kept with jealous effort out of mind. Then comes the desire to intervene and prevent the other from being untrue ; to act for him, to force into his hands, against his will, the proofs of loyalty and love which he cannot produce for himself ; and at the same time to try to be blind to the fact that if he does not wish for them, the effort is of its very nature useless. All this Elizabeth Barrett went through, watching her father's silence, waiting for him day after day to prove the love she was so eager to believe in, until at last there was no more room for doubt or hope. On October 13th she writes—

"Do not be angry with me—do not think it my fault—but *I do not go to Italy* . . . it has ended as I feared. What passed between George and Papa there is no need of telling: only the latter said that I 'might go if I pleased, but that going it would be under his heaviest displeasure.' George, in great indignation, pressed the question fully: but all was vain . . . and I am left in this position . . . to go, if I please, with his displeasure over me, (which after what you have said and after what Mr. Kenyon has said, and after what my own conscience and deepest moral convictions say aloud, I would unhesitatingly do at this hour !) and necessarily run the risk of exposing my sister and brother to that same displeasure, . . . from which risk I shrink and fall back and feel that to incur it, is impossible. Dear Mr. Kenyon has been here, and we have been talking—and he sees what I see . . . that I am justified in going myself, but not in bringing others into difficulty. The very kindness and goodness with which they desire me (both my sisters) 'not to think of them,' naturally makes me think more of them. And so, tell me that I am not wrong in taking up my chain again and acquiescing in this hard necessity. The bitterest 'fact' of all is, that I had believed Papa to have loved me more than he obviously does: but I never regret knowledge; . . . I mean I never would *unknow* anything . . . even were it the taste of apples by the Dead Sea—and this must be accepted like the rest."

It may be conceived what a time of suffering this was for Browning. To know, as he could not help knowing now, that she was ready to give herself to him if her health had not barred the way, to see what seemed a

supreme chance for her health refused and rejected by her own father ; and to be forced to stand by and watch, powerless even to raise an open protest. As the Italian plan faded, he caught at the single possibility by which her freedom might be secured, and spoke out clearly and passionately.

“ How ‘all changes’ ! When I first knew you—you know what followed. I supposed you to labour under an incurable complaint—and, of course, to be completely dependent on your father for its commonest alleviations ; the moment after that inconsiderate letter, I reproached myself bitterly with the selfishness apparently involved in any proposition I might then have made—for though I have never been at all frightened of the world, nor mistrustful of my power to deal with it, and get my purpose out of it if once I thought it worth while, yet I could not but feel the consideration, of *what* failure would *now* be, paralyze all effort even in fancy. When you told me lately that ‘you could never be poor’—all my solicitude was at an end—I had but myself to care about, and I told you, what I believed and believe, that I can at any time amply provide for that, and that I could cheerfully and confidently undertake the removing *that* obstacle. Now again the circumstances shift—and you are in what I should wonder at as the veriest slavery—and I who *could* free you from it, I am here scarcely daring to write, . . . though I know you must feel for me and forgive what forces itself from me . . . what retires so mutely into my heart at your least word . . . what *shall not* be again written or spoken, if you so will . . . that I should be made happy beyond all hope of expression by. Now while

I *dream*, let me once dream ! I would marry you now and thus—I would come when you let me, and go when you bade me—I would be no more than one of your brothers—‘*no more*’—that is, instead of getting to-morrow for Saturday, I should get Saturday as well—two hours for one—when your head ached I should be *here*. I deliberately choose the realization of that dream (—of sitting simply by you for an hour every day) rather than any other, excluding you, I am to form for this world, or any world I know—And it will continue but a dream.

“God bless my dearest E. B. B.

“R. B.”

And at last, deserted as she found herself by her own, she answers steadily.

“And now listen to me in turn. You have touched me more profoundly than I thought even *you* could have touched me—my heart was full when you came here to-day. Henceforward I am yours for everything but to do you harm—and I am yours too much, in my heart, ever to consent to do you harm in that way. If I could consent to do it, not only should I be less loyal, . . . but in one sense, less yours. I say this to you without drawback and reserve, because it is all I am able to say, and perhaps all I *shall* be able to say. However this may be, a promise goes to you in it that none, except God and your will, shall interpose between you and me, . . . I mean, that if He should free me within a moderate time from the trailing chain of this weakness, I will then be to you whatever at that hour you shall choose, . . . whether

friend or more than friend, . . . a friend to the last in any case. So it rests with God and with you—only in the meanwhile you are most absolutely free . . . ‘unentangled’ (as they call it) by the breadth of a thread—and if I did not know that you considered yourself so, I would not see you any more, let the effort cost me what it might. You may force me to *feel* . . . but you cannot force me to *think* contrary to my first thought . . . that it were better for you to forget me at once in one relation. And if better for *you*, can it be bad for *me*? which flings me down on the stone pavement of the logicians.”

“*My own, now!*” he answers, “for there it is!—oh, do not fear I am ‘*entangled*’—my crown is loose on my head, not nailed there—my pearl lies in my hand—I may return it to the sea, if I will !”

So the outer shell of life remains after all as before—the weekly visit, the daily letters,—but illuminated by the outspoken love which she could no longer bring herself to doubt or discourage. At first she had thought it a mere generous impulse on his part, half due to intellectual admiration, half due to a mere pity for her infirmities, and all glorified by his own imagination. Her gratitude and friendship had kindled to the deepest devotion, and still her first thought had been her terror at the possibility of harming him, or standing in his way. Finally, she realized that he loved, not her attributes, but herself ; and after that there was no more room for misgiving.

V

ROBERT BROWNING

1846

FROM this point the letters are carried forward upon a tide of eloquent passion which neither of them tries any longer to stem. Not that she yet allows any definite engagement ; the most that she will say is that if the recovery of her strength continues through the winter, she will then accept his decision, whatever it may be. But for Browning this represented the full consummation of his hopes. The rebuff she had had from her father seemed to give him a right to the guardianship of her health. His severest trial was not on that score ; it was rather his anomalous position in the Wimpole Street household. This man, whose open honesty was the very corner-stone of his character, who was apt indeed to glory in his fearlessness, with a touch of contempt for feebler vessels that is not altogether agreeable,—this loud, high-spirited, masterful man had to slink cautiously into the house on a false pretence, with elaborate precautions to escape observation, like the clandestine lover in a comedy. But it is to his honour that he accepts the inconsistency frankly and simply. There could be no question

whatever of the necessity for it ; they had a right to their lives, and they were dealing with a man who, as a clear matter of fact, could not be dealt with upon normal lines. Mr. Barrett's exaggerated obstinacy touched the point of mania : it was just as much beyond the reach of reason as acknowledged insanity could be, and this all his children knew well. The situation, therefore, with all its vulgar little shifts and equivocations, had simply to be accepted as it was, and Browning faced it without rhetoric or casuistry. He loses no dignity, even while we watch him scheming to arrive at the house while her father is out, and to get downstairs again before he comes in. His perfect trust in his love and hers to justify the methods which are forced upon them is an impressive thing, and endears him more than the outbursts of pride in his own strength and independence, which at other times he indulges in now and then, and which always ring a little false and pharisaical.

All that, however, falls off him at the touch of passion. For sustained vigour, for incisiveness of thought and phrase—in spite of characteristic inability to let a single sentence flow forward without throttling it in its course—and most of all for a kind of headlong rapture, youthful in its irresponsibility, mature in its various richness, I do not think that his letters to Elizabeth Barrett can be surpassed, any more than can hers for their charm, their felicities, the noble passion that shines through every word of them. The vexed question whether such intimate outpourings should be published at all shall certainly not be argued here. It is not always easy to discriminate between the actual delicacy of one's feelings, and the

delicacy one would like them to possess ; and at times the indignation aroused by indiscreet disclosures is perhaps a tribute to the latter rather than the proof of the former. The Browning letters, in their completeness, and in the double genius which meets in them, are unique ; and at this distance of sixty years I think we may look at them without shyness. That step achieved, it is true that something more is required, if the letters are to be read rightly. They must be viewed by the light of a sympathetic imagination ; but then this imagination is of a kind that few men or women are unable to supply. Most people after all know how the least adorned words and phrases, in the right circumstances and between the right people, may shine and ring with beauty and life and romance, till the whole spirit seems to leap into sudden freedom at the sight and sound. So it was to the writers of these letters. To each the words of the other were not merely words. They came carrying with them a sense of the writer's presence, of the hand that had traced them. They were not the rose, but it was straight from the rose that they came.

And this must be kept in remembrance by whoever reads these letters, or he will not only lose their right beauty, but will waste time over irrelevancies. For instance, he will chafe at their inordinate length ; that is to misunderstand them hopelessly, because it is of the essence of the matter to remember that in such circumstances life has, next to meeting and talking, no sweeter pleasure to offer than the writing of letters ; to put down the pen is to turn to a world that has lost its savour. Hence these torrents of words, these iterations, this covering of page after page

with every stray thought or feeling. Again, and worse still, a reader is apt to think that certain arbitrary laws are fundamental for men and women in literature ; that the association of romance with people past their first youth has in it something absurd ; and moreover that it is undignified for the man to be younger than the woman. But no one really thinks that people with six years between them cannot be upon equal terms, or that passion loses its brilliance after seven and twenty. What though Browning was thirty-three, and Elizabeth Barrett approaching forty ? Their romance, though printed in a book, is not a work of fiction, and must be read in no spirit of convention. The mind must be tuned to real experience before it can be viewed aright.

For any one who will approach them with the small effort of imagination I have indicated, the interest and beauty of these volumes can hardly be over-estimated. They ought, of course, to be read in full to be appreciated completely, because it is impossible to disentangle the tightly twisted thread without losing much of its lustre. The letters run so closely into one another, each is so full of associations with what has gone before, and explanation of what is coming, that to make a satisfactory selection is impossible, especially if it is to be confined to one side only of the correspondence. In the account that follows, much must necessarily be sacrificed. One of their chief charms is the way in which the ball is passed from hand to hand, each letter catching up the tone of the preceding one, and following out the topics suggested. Moreover, justice cannot, of course, be done to the inexhaustible variety of Browning's letters. But if the result is unsatisfactory, it

will be the more inducement to the reader to turn to the two crowded volumes, where the whole maze of the correspondence can be penetrated at leisure. In this book only the most obvious characteristics, only the leading lines, can be dwelt on and illustrated ; and it is already time to pick up the story where it was dropped in the last chapter.

If there had been a reason for keeping his visits a secret before, there was a hundred times the reason now. Mr. Barrett might know vaguely that Browning had visited his daughter every week for months, and that her table was always covered by the flowers which he had brought, without conceiving that he came for any other purpose than to talk about poetry ; and from the rest of her household she could count on absolute loyalty. But the outside world were likely to be more shrewd than her father, and less discreet than her brothers and sisters ; and precautions were redoubled against letting any one, even Mr. Kenyon, even Miss Mitford, know how often they met. She writes on November 1, 1845—

“ All to-day, Friday, Miss Mitford has been here ! She came at two and went away at seven—and I feel as if I had been making a five-hour speech on the corn laws in Harriet Martineau’s parliament ; . . . so tired I am. Not that dear Miss Mitford did not talk both for me and herself, . . . for that, of course, she did. But I was forced to answer once every ten minutes at least—and Flush, my usual companion, does not exact so much—and so I am tired and come to rest myself on this paper. Your name was not once spoken to-day ; a little from my good fencing ; when I saw you at

the end of an alley of associations, I pushed the conversation up the next—because I was afraid of questions, such as every moment I expected, with a pair of woman's eyes behind them ; and these are worse than Mr. Kenyon's when he puts on his spectacles. So your name was not once spoken—not thought of, I do not say—perhaps when I once lost her at Chevy Chase and found her suddenly with Isidore the queen's hairdresser, my thoughts might have wandered off to you and your unanswered letter while she passed gradually from that to this—I am not sure of the contrary. And Isidore, they say, reads Béranger, and is supposed to be the most literary person at Court—and wasn't at Chevy Chase, one must needs think.

“One must needs write nonsense rather—for I have written it there. The sense and the truth is, that your letter went to the bottom of my heart, and that my thoughts have turned round it ever since and through all the talking to-day. Yes indeed, dreams ! But what *is* not dreaming is this and this—this reading of these words—this proof of this regard—all this that you are to me in fact, and which you cannot guess the full meaning of, dramatic poet as you are . . . cannot . . . since you do not know what my life meant before you touched it, . . . and my angel at the gate of the prison ! My wonder is greater than your wonders, . . . I who sate here alone but yesterday, so weary of my own being that to take interest in my very poems I had to lift them up by an effort and separate them from myself and cast them out from me into the sunshine where I was not—feeling nothing of the light which fell on them even—making indeed a sort of pleasure and interest about that factitious personality associated with them, . . . but knowing

it to be all far on the outside of *me . . . myself*, . . . not seeming to touch it with the end of my finger, . . . and receiving it as a mockery and a bitterness when people persisted in confounding one with another. Morbid it was if you like it—perhaps very morbid—but all these heaps of letters which go into the fire one after the other, and which, because I am a woman and have written verses, it seems so amusing to the letter-writers of your sex to write and see ‘what will come of it,’ . . . some, from kind good motives I know, . . . well, . . . how could it all make for me even such a narrow strip of sunshine as Flush finds on the floor sometimes, and lays his nose along, with both ears out in the shadow? It was not for *me . . . me . . .* in any way: it was not within my reach—I did not seem to touch it, as I said. Flush came nearer, and I was grateful to him . . . yes, grateful . . . for not being tired! I have felt grateful and flattered . . . yes, flattered . . . when he has chosen rather to stay with me all day than to go downstairs. Grateful too, with reason, I have been and am to my own family for not letting me see that I was a burthen. These are facts. And now how am I to feel when you tell me what you have told me—and what you ‘could, would, and will’ do, and *shall not* do? . . . but when you tell me?

“Only remember that such words make you freer and freer—if you can be freer than free—just as every one makes me happier and richer—too rich by you, to claim any debt. May God bless you always. When I wrote that letter to let you come the first time, do you know, the tears ran down my cheeks . . . I could not tell why: partly it might be mere nervousness. And then, I was vexed with you for wishing to come as other people did, and vexed

with myself for not being able to refuse you as I did them."

Before Mr. Kenyon their very ingenuous and unskilful diplomacy is continually on the verge of breaking down—

"I have considered about Mr. Kenyon and it seems best, in the event of a question or of a remark equivalent to a question, to confess to the visits 'generally once a week' . . . because he may hear, one, two, three different ways, . . . not to say the other reasons and Chaucer's charge against 'doubleness.' I fear . . . I fear that he (not Chaucer) will wonder a little—and he has looked at me with scanning spectacles already and talked of its being a mystery to him how you made your way here ; and *I*, who though *I* can *bespeak* self-command, have no sort of presence of mind (not so much as one would use to play at Jack straws) did not help the case at all. Well—it cannot be helped."

In a parenthesis it may be noted that in this same letter she brings herself at last to ask him—after having hung on the verge of doing so for a long while—to give her back that early unlucky letter of his which she had returned to him. "And send it at once," she adds, "if undestroyed ; do not wait till Saturday." To which he answers—

"Could you think *that* that untoward letter lived one moment after it returned to me ? I burned it and cried 'serve it right' ! Poor letter,—yet I should have been vexed and offended *then* to be told I *could* love you better

than I did already. ‘Live and *learn!*’ Live and love you
—dearest, as loves you

“R. B.”

— “Serve *me* right,” she adds next day. “I do not dare to complain. I wished for the safety of that letter so much that I finished by persuading myself of the probability of it: but ‘serve *me* right’ quite clearly. And yet —but no more ‘and yets’ about it. ‘And yets’ fray the silk.”

Another incident of this time would be too intimate, too tender in its triviality, even to refer to, if it did not form the subject of two of the least happy of the “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” one opening in a strain too unfortunately commonplace for quotation, the other with the fine line—

“The soul’s Rialto hath its merchandise.”

They describe, with distressing lack of distinction, the perennial exchange of a “lock of hair”—an event which, at the actual time and place, may invest itself with all the romance and beauty of the world’s most virginal age, but which certainly requires, if it is to be translated in no playful strain into verse, the exercise of a consummate discretion, very far beyond that of the sonnets in question. It may seem tactless to allude to the episode at all; but I do so in order to induce any reader of the sonnets who needs inducing, to turn to the letters* where it is dealt with, not as literature, but as a vital question of the moment.

* “Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.,” vol. i. 297, ff.

The tentative requests, the hesitations, the amount of words which the whole matter seems to require, throw over these pages an enchanting air of humanity. But these tiny things lie too near the inmost penetralia of the heart to be discussed ; “ non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.”

Such an incident disposes once for all of the idea that, being poets, and not so very young at that, they loved each other in some more rarefied sense than ordinary lovers. The familiar ritual served their case as it has served others ; and if that were not enough, there are a hundred small glimpses and echoes which show how far their love was from being a mere intangible union of sympathies. Such a glimpse is when Browning writes—

“ You very well know *what* a vision it is you give me—when you speak of *standing up by the table* to care for my flowers—(which I will never be ashamed of again, by the way—I will say for the future ; ‘ here are my best ’—in this as in other things). Now, do you remember, that once I bade you not surprise me out of my good behaviour by standing to meet me unawares, as visions do, some day ? ”

And again, “ I must pray you, in the old way, *not to receive me standing*—I should not remain master of myself, I do believe ! ” He meets her in dreams, he says, on the stairs, with a thrill of delicious excitement at seeing her on her feet ; and she answers with the lightest of mockery—

“ Dearest—when, in the next dream, you meet me in the ‘ landing-place,’ tell me why I am to stand up to be

reviewed again. What a fancy, *that* is of yours, for ‘full-lengths’—and what bad policy, if a fancy, to talk of it so! because you would have had the glory and advantage, and privilege, of seeing me on my feet twenty times before now; if you had not impressed on me, in some ineffable manner, that to stand on my head would scarcely be stranger. Nevertheless you shall have it your own way, as you have everything—which makes you so very, very, exemplarily submissive, you know!”

There are no outer events to chronicle for the winter months that followed the abandonment of the plan for Italy. They were still secure in their secrecy; she kept her hold on her strength, far more than she had dared to hope, in the miraculous mildness of the season, and their letters proceed in undisturbed fullness and serenity. I will here quote some pages from her letters, not merely for the sake of their intrinsic beauty, but because they will illustrate, far more than the most exhaustive analysis, the depths of her nobility and sweetness. I shall not in each case quote the whole letter; though it is to be noted that the little rows of dots which usually denote omissions, are in these letters a part—and a very characteristic part—of the text. The following is of November 18, 1845:—

“The truth is . . . since we really are talking truths in this world . . . that I have doubted you—ah, you know!—I felt from the beginning so sure of the nobility and integrity in you that I would have trusted you to make a path for my soul—that, you know. I felt certain that you believed of yourself every word you spoke or wrote—

and you must not blame me if I thought besides sometimes (it was the extent of my thought) that you were self-deceived as to the nature of your own feelings. If you could turn over every page of my heart like the pages of a book, you would see nothing there offensive to the least of your feelings . . . not even to the outside fringes of your man's vanity . . . should you have any vanity like a man ; which I *do* doubt. I never wronged you in the least of things—never . . . I thank God for it. But ‘self-deceived,’ it was so easy for you to be : see how on every side and day by day, men are—and women too—in this sort of feelings. ‘Self-deceived,’ it was so possible for you to be, and while I thought it possible, could I help thinking it *best* for you that it should be so—and was it not right in me to persist in thinking it possible ? It was my reverence for you that made me persist ! What was *I* that I should think otherwise ? I had been shut up here too long face to face with my own spirit, not to know myself, and so, to have lost the common illusions of vanity. All the men I had ever known could not make your stature among them. So it was not distrust, but reverence rather. I sate by while the angel stirred the water, and I called it *Miracle*. Do not blame me now. . . . *my* angel !

“Nor say, that I ‘do not lean’ on you with all the weight of my ‘past’ . . . because I do ! You cannot guess what you are to me—you cannot—it is not possible :—and though I have said *that* before, I must say it again . . . for it comes again to be said. It is something to me between dream and miracle, all of it—as if some dream of my earliest, brightest dreaming-time had been lying through these dark years to steep in the sunshine, returning to me

in a double light. *Can it be*, I say to myself, that *you* feel for me *so*? can it be meant for me? this from *you*?

"If it is your 'right' that I should be gloomy at will with you, you exercise it, I do think—for although I cannot promise to be very sorrowful when you come (how could that be?) yet from different motives it seems to me that I have written to you quite superfluities about my 'abomination of desolation,'—yes, indeed, and blamed myself afterwards. And now I must say this besides. When grief came upon grief, I never was tempted to ask 'How have I deserved this of God?' as sufferers sometimes do: I always feel that there must be cause enough . . . corruption enough, needing purification . . . weakness enough, needing strengthening . . . *nothing* of the chastisement could come to me without cause and need. But in this different hour, when joy follows joy, and God makes me happy, as you say, *through you* . . . I cannot repress the . . . 'How have I deserved *this* of Him?'—I know I have not—I know I do not.

"Could it be that heart and life were devastated to make room for you? If so, it was well done,—dearest! They leave the ground fallow before the wheat."

It is clear from the following that Browning had suggested the possibility of laying their case before Mr. Barrett in a letter, on the bare chance of appeasing the wrath they were laying up for themselves:—

" [Post-mark, Dec. 13, 1845.]

"As to unfavourable influences, . . . I can speak of them quietly, having foreseen them from the first, . . . and it is true, I have been thinking since yesterday, that I

might be prevented from receiving you here, and *should*, if all were known : but with that act, the adverse power would end. It is not my fault if I have to choose between two affections ; only my pain ; and I have not to choose between two duties, I feel, . . . since I am yours, while I am of any worth to you at all. For the plan of the sealed letter, it would correct no evil,—ah, you do not see, you do not understand. The danger does not come from the side to which a reason may go. Only one person holds the thunder—and I shall be thundered at ; I shall not be reasoned with—it is impossible. I could tell you some dreary chronicles made for laughing and crying over ; and you know that if I once thought I might be loved enough to be spared above others, I cannot think so now. In the mean time we need not for the present be afraid. Let there be ever so many suspectors, there will be no informers. I suspect the suspectors, but the informers are out of the world, I am very sure :—and then, the one person, by a curious anomaly, *never* draws an inference of this order, until the bare blade of it is thrust palpably into his hand, point outwards. So it has been in other cases than ours—and so it is, at this moment in the house, with others than ourselves.

“I have your letter to stop me. If I had my whole life in my hands with your letter, could I thank you for it, I wonder, at all worthily ? I cannot believe that I could. Yet in life and in death I shall be grateful to you.—

“But for the paper—no. Now, observe, that it would seem like a prepared apology for something wrong. And besides—the apology would be nothing but the offence in another form—unless you said it was all a mistake—(*will*

you, again ?)—that it was all a mistake and you were only calling for your boots ! Well, if you said *that*, it would be worth writing, but anything less would be something worse than nothing : and would not save me—which you were thinking of, I know—would not save me the least of the stripes. For ‘conditions —now I will tell you what I said once in a jest . . .

“If a prince of Eldorado should come, with a pedigree of lineal descent from some signory in the moon in one hand, and a ticket of good-behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel, in the other ?—?

“‘Why even *then*,’ said my sister Arabel, ‘it would not do?’ And she was right, and we all agreed that she was right. It is an obliquity of the will—and one laughs at it till the turn comes for crying. Poor Henrietta has suffered silently, with that softest of possible natures, which hers is indeed ; beginning with implicit obedience, and ending with something as unlike it as possible : but, you see, where money is wanted, and where the dependence is total—see ! And when once, in the case of the one dearest to me ; when just at the last he was involved in the same grief, and I attempted to make over my advantages to him ; (it could be no sacrifice, you know—I did not want the money, and could buy nothing with it so good as his happiness,—) when then, my hands were seized and tied—and then and there, in the midst of the trouble, came the end of all ! I tell you all this, just to make you understand a little. Did I not tell you before ? But there is no danger at present—and why ruffle this present with disquieting thoughts ? Why not leave that future to itself ? For me, I sit in the track of the avalanche quite calmly . . . so calmly as to

surprise myself at intervals—and yet I know the reason of the calmness well."

"[Post-mark, Jan. 6, 1846.]

" You never guessed perhaps, what I look back to at this moment in the physiology of our intercourse, the curious double feeling I had about you—you personally, and you as the writer of these letters, and the crisis of the feeling, when I was positively vexed and jealous of myself for not succeeding better in making a unity of the two. I could not! And moreover I could not help but that the writer of the letters seemed nearer to me, long . . . long . . . and in spite of the postmark, than did the personal visitor who confounded me, and left me constantly under such an impression of its being all dream-work on his side, that I have stamped my feet on this floor with impatience to think of having to wait so many hours before the 'candid' closing letter could come with its confessional of an illusion. 'People say,' I used to think, 'that women *always* know, and certainly I do not know, and therefore . . . therefore.'—The logic crushed on like Juggernaut's car. But in the letters it was different—the dear letters took me on the side of my own ideal life where I was able to stand a little upright and look round. I could read such letters for ever and answer them after a fashion . . . that, I felt from the beginning. But *you*—!"

"[Post-mark, Jan. 17, 1846.]

" For the rest, I will think as you desire: but I have thought a great deal, and there are certainties which I know; and I hope we *both* are aware that nothing can be

more hopeless than our position in some relations and aspects, though you do not guess perhaps that the very approach to the subject is shut up by dangers, and that from the moment of a suspicion entering *one* mind, we should be able to meet never again in this room, nor to have intercourse by letter through the ordinary channel. I mean, that letters of yours, addressed to me here, would infallibly be stopped and destroyed—if not opened. Therefore it is advisable to hurry on nothing—on these grounds it is advisable. What should I do if I did not see you nor hear from you, without being able to feel that it was for your happiness? What should I do for a month even? And then, I might be thrown out of the window or its equivalent—I look back shuddering to the dreadful scenes in which poor Henrietta was involved who never offended as I have offended . . . years ago which seem as present as to-day. She had forbidden the subject to be referred to until that consent was obtained—and at a word she gave up all—at a word. In fact she had no true attachment, as I observed to Arabel at the time—a child never submitted more meekly to a revoked holiday. Yet how she was made to suffer! Oh, the dreadful scenes! and only because she had seemed to feel a little. I told you, I think, that there was an obliquity—an eccentricity, or something beyond—on one class of subjects. I hear how her knees were made to ring upon the floor, now! she was carried out of the room in strong hysterics, and I, who rose up to follow her, though I was quite well at that time and suffered only by sympathy, fell flat down upon my face in a fainting-fit. Arabel thought I was dead.

“I have tried to forget it all—but now I must remember

—and throughout our intercourse *I have remembered*. It is necessary to remember so much as to avoid such evils as are inevitable, and for this reason I would conceal nothing from you. Do *you* remember, besides, that there can be no faltering on my ‘part,’ and that, if I should remain well, which is not proved yet, I will do for you what you please and as you please to have it done. But there is time for considering!

“Only . . . as you speak of ‘counsel,’ I will take courage to tell you that my *sisters know*. Arabel is in most of my confidences, and being often in the room with me, taxed me with the truth long ago—she saw that I was affected from some cause—and I told her. We are as safe with both of them as possible . . . and they thoroughly understand that *if there should be any change it would not be your fault* . . . I made them understand that thoroughly. From themselves I have received nothing but the most smiling words of kindness and satisfaction (I thought I might tell you so much), they have too much tenderness for me to fail in it now. My brothers, it is quite necessary not to draw into a dangerous responsibility. I have felt that from the beginning, and shall continue to feel it—though I hear and can observe that they are full of suspicions and conjectures, which are never unkindly expressed. I told you once that we held hands the faster in this house for the weight over our heads. But the absolute *knowledge* would be dangerous for my brothers: with my sisters it is different, and I could not continue to conceal from *them* what they had under their eyes; and then, Henrietta is in a like position. It was not wrong of me to let them know it?—no?”

"[Post-mark, Jan. 27, 1846.]

"Do you ever wonder at me . . . that I should write such things [of her father], and have written others so different? *I have thought that in myself very often.* Insincerity and injustice may seem the two ends, while I occupy the straight betwixt two—and I should not like you to doubt how this may be! Sometimes I have begun to show you the truth, and torn the paper; I *could* not. Yet now again I am borne on to tell you, . . . to save you from some thoughts which you cannot help perhaps.

"There has been no insincerity—nor is there injustice. I believe, I am certain, I have loved him better than the rest of his children. I have heard the fountain within the rock, and my heart has struggled in towards him through the stones of the rock . . . thrust off . . . dropping off . . . turning in again and clinging! Knowing what is excellent in him well, loving him as my only parent left, and for himself dearly, notwithstanding that hardness and the miserable 'system' which made him appear harder still, I have loved him and been proud of him for his high qualities, for his courage and fortitude when he bore up so bravely years ago under the worldly reverses which he yet felt acutely—more than you and I could feel them—but the fortitude was admirable. Then came the trials of love—then, I was repulsed too often, . . . made to suffer in the suffering of those by my side . . . depressed by petty daily sadnesses and terrors, from which it is possible however for an elastic affection to rise again as past. Yet my friends used to say 'You look broken-spirited'—and it was true. In the midst, came my illness,—and when I was ill he grew gentler and let me draw nearer than ever I had

done : and after that great stroke . . . you *know* . . . though *that* fell in the middle of a storm of emotion and sympathy on my part, which drove clearly against him, God seemed to strike our hearts together by the shock ; and I was grateful to him for not saying aloud what I said to myself in my agony, '*If it had not been for you*' . . . ! And comparing my self-reproach to what I imagined his self-reproach must certainly be (for if *I* had loved selfishly, *he* had not been kind), I felt as if I could love and forgive him for two . . . (I knowing that serene generous departed spirit, and seeming left to represent it) . . . and I did love him better than all those left to *me* to love in the world here. I proved a little my affection for him, by coming to London at the risk of my life rather than diminish the comfort of his home by keeping a part of my family away from him. And afterwards for long and long he spoke to me kindly and gently, and of me affectionately and with too much praise ; and God knows that I had as much joy as I imagined myself capable of again, in the sound of his footstep on the stairs, and of his voice when he prayed in this room ; my best hope, as I have told him since, being, to die beneath his eyes. Love is so much to me naturally—it is, to all women ! and it was so much to *me* to feel sure at last that *he* loved me—to forget all blame—to pull the weeds up from that last illusion of life :—and this, till the Pisa-business, which threw me off, far as ever, again—farther than ever—when George said ‘he could not flatter me’ and I dared not flatter myself. But do *you* believe that I never wrote what I did not feel : I never did. And I ask one kindness more . . . do not notice what I have written here. Let it pass. We can

alter nothing by ever so many words. After all, he is the victim. He isolates himself—and now and then he feels it . . . the cold dead silence all round, which is the effect of an incredible system. If he were not stronger than most men, he could not bear it as he does. With such high qualities too!—so upright and honourable—you would esteem him, you would like him, I think. And so . . . dearest . . . let *that* be the last word.

“I dare say you have asked yourself sometimes, why it was that I never managed to draw you into the house here, so that you might make your own way. Now *that* is one of the things impossible to me. I have not influence enough for *that*. George can never invite a friend of his even. Do you see? The people who do come here, come by particular licence and association . . . Capt. Surtees Cook being one of them. Once . . . when I was in high favour too . . . I asked for Mr. Kenyon to be invited to dinner—he an old college friend, and living close by and so affectionate to me always—I felt that he must be hurt by the neglect, and asked. *It was in vain.* Now you see—”

At this point comes the first suggestion, in a letter from him, that the end of the following summer shall see their marriage. He writes on January 28, 1846—

“My only good in this world—that against which all the world goes for nothing—is to spend my life with you, and be yours. You know that when I *claim* anything, it is really yourself in me—you *give* me a right and bid me use it, and I, in fact, am most obeying you when I appear most exacting on my own account—so, in that feeling, I dare claim, once for all, and in all possible cases

(except that dreadful one of your becoming worse again . . . in which case I wait till life ends with both of us), I claim your promise's fulfilment—say, at the summer's end : it cannot be for your good that this state of things should continue. We can go to Italy for a year or two and be happy as day and night are long. For me, I adore you. This is all unnecessary, I feel as I write : but you will think of the main fact as *ordained*, granted by God, will you not, dearest ?—so, not to be put in doubt *ever again*—then, we can go quietly thinking of after matters. Till to-morrow, and ever after, God bless my heart's own, own Ba. All my soul follows you, love—encircles you—and I live in being yours.”

To which this is her answer—

“ Let it be this way, ever dearest. If in the time of fine weather, I am not ill . . . *then . . . not now . . .* you shall decide, and your decision shall be duty and desire to me, both—I will make no difficulties. Remember, in the meanwhile, that I *have* decided to let it be as you shall choose . . . *shall* choose. That I love you enough to give you up ‘for your good,’ is proof (to myself at least) that I love you enough for any other end :—but you thought *too much of me in the last letter*. Do not mistake me. I believe and trust in all your words—only you are generous unawares, as other men are selfish.”

I next quote from a letter of hers of February 24, 1846—

“ Yet indeed I did not fancy that I was to love *you* when you came to see me—no indeed . . . any more than

I did your caring on your side. My ambition when we began our correspondence, was simply that you should forget I was a woman (being weary and *blasée* of the empty written gallantries, of which I have had my share and all the more perhaps from my peculiar position which made them so without consequence), that you should forget *that* and let us be friends, and consent to teach me what you knew better than I, in art and human nature, and give me your sympathy in the meanwhile. I am a great hero-worshipper and had admired your poetry for years, and to feel that you liked to write to me and be written to was a pleasure and a pride, as I used to tell you I am sure, and then your letters were not like other letters, as I must not tell you again. Also you *influenced* me, in a way in which no one else did. For instance, by two or three half words you made me see you, and other people had delivered orations on the same subject quite without effect. I surprised everybody in this house by consenting to see you. Then, when you came, you never went away. I mean I had a sense of your presence constantly. Yes . . . and to prove how free that feeling was from the remotest presentiment of what has occurred, I said to Papa in my unconsciousness the next morning . . . ‘it is most extraordinary how the idea of Mr. Browning does beset me—I suppose it is not being used to see strangers, in some degree—but it haunts me . . . it is a persecution.’ On which he smiled and said that ‘it was not grateful to my friend to use such a word.’ When the letter came . . .

“Do you know that all that time I was frightened of you? frightened in this way. I felt as if you had a power

over me and meant to use it, and that I could not breathe or speak very differently from what you chose to make me. As to my thoughts, I had it in my head somehow that you read *them* as you read the newspaper—examined them, and fastened them down writhing under your long entomological pins—ah, do you remember the entomology of it all?

“But the power was used upon *me*—and I never doubted that you had mistaken your own mind, the strongest of us having some exceptional weakness. Turning the wonder round in all lights, I came to what you admitted yesterday . . . yes, I saw *that* very early . . . that you had come here with the intention of trying to love whomever you should find, . . . and also that what I had said about exaggerating the amount of what I could be to you, had just operated in making you more determined to justify your own presentiment in the face of mine. Well—and if that last clause was true a little, too . . . why should I be sorry now . . . and why should you have fancied for a moment, that the first could make me sorry? At first, and when I did not believe that you really loved me, when I thought you deceived yourself, *then*, it was different. But now . . . now . . . when I see and believe your attachment for me, do you think that any cause in the world (except what diminished it) could render it less a source of joy to me? I mean as far as I myself am considered. Now if you ever fancy that I am *vain* of your love for me, you will be unjust, remember. If it were less dear, and less above me, I might be *vain* perhaps. But I may say *before* God and you, that of all the events of my life, inclusive of its afflictions, nothing has humbled

me so much as your love. Right or wrong it may be, but true it *is*, and I tell you. Your love has been to me like God's own love, which makes the receivers of it kneelers."

In justice to Browning, part of his extremely characteristic answer to this last must be given—

“Wednesday Morning.

“[Post-mark, February 25, 1846.]

“Once you were pleased to say, my own Ba, that ‘I made you do as I would.’ I am quite sure, you make me speak as you would, and not at all as I mean—and for one instance, I never surely spoke anything half so untrue as that ‘I came with the intention of loving whomever I should find’—No! wreathed shells and hollows in ruins, and roofs of caves may transform a voice wonderfully, make more of it or less, or so change it as to almost alter, but turn a ‘no’ into a ‘yes’ can no echo (except the Irish one), and I said ‘no’ to such a charge, and still say ‘no.’ I *did* have a presentiment—and though it is hardly possible for me to look back on it now without lending it the true colours given to it by the event, yet I *can* put them aside, if I please, and remember that I not merely hoped it would not be so (*not* that the effect I expected to be produced would be *less* than in anticipation, certainly I did not hope *that*, but that it would range itself with the old feelings of simple reverence and sympathy and friendship, that I should love you as much as I supposed I could love, and no more), but in the confidence that nothing could occur to divert me from my intended way of life, I made—went on making arrangements to return to Italy.”

In the following she alludes to a visit of Browning's which had apparently been specially noticed by her father :—

"I have decided (for me) to let it be as you shall please —now I told you that before. Either we will live on as we are, until an obstacle arises,—for indeed I do not look for a 'security' where you suppose, and the very appearance of it *there*, is what most rebuts me—or I will be yours in the obvious way, to go out of England the next half-hour if possible. As to the steps to be taken (or not taken) before the last step, we must think of those. The worst is that the only question is about a *form*. Virtually the evil is the same all round, whatever we do. Dearest, it was plain to see yesterday evening when he came into this room for a moment at seven o'clock, before going to his own to dress for dinner . . . plain to see, that he was not altogether pleased at finding you here in the morning. There was no pretext for objecting gravely—but it was plain that he was not pleased. Do not let this make you uncomfortable, he will forget all about it, and I was not *scolded*, do you understand. It was more manner, but my sisters thought as I did of the significance :—and it was enough to prove to me (if I had not known) what a desperate game we should be playing if we depended on a yielding nerve *there*."

(“Morning” in the last paragraph is, of course, the old-fashioned use of the word which survives in expressions like “morning performance.” Browning’s visits, as a matter of fact, always took place in the afternoon.)

The above letter calls from Browning what he hardly anywhere else allows himself,—a torrent of indignation at

such heartless selfishness from a father to a daughter. She responds with extraordinary insight—

“[Post-mark, March 4, 1846.]

“ You do not see aright what I meant to tell you on another subject. If he was displeased, (and it was expressed by a shadow a mere negation of pleasure) it was not with you as a visitor and my friend. You must not fancy such a thing. It was a sort of instinctive indisposition towards seeing you here—unexplained to himself, I have no doubt—of course unexplained, or he would have desired me to receive you never again, *that* would have been done at once and unscrupulously. But without defining his own feeling, he rather disliked seeing you here—it just touched one of his vibratory wires, brushed by and touched it—oh, we understand in this house. He is not a nice observer, but, at intervals very wide, he is subject to lightnings—call them fancies, sometimes right, sometimes wrong. Certainly it was not in the character of a ‘sympathizing friend’ that you made him a very little cross on Monday. And yet you never were nor will be in danger of being *thanked*, he would not think of it. For the reserve, the apprehension—dreadful those things are, and desecrating to one’s own nature—but we did not make this position, we only endure it. The root of the evil is the miserable misconception of the limits and character of parental rights—it is a mistake of the intellect rather than of the heart. Then, after using one’s children as one’s chattels for a time, the children drop lower and lower toward the level of the chattels, and the duties of human sympathy to them become difficult in proportion. And

(it seems strange to say it, yet it is true) *love*, he does not conceive of at all. He has feeling, he can be moved deeply, he is capable of affection in a peculiar way, but *that*, he does not understand, any more than he understands Chaldee, respecting it less of course."

The next is from a letter of March 29—

"Nearly a year ago ! how the time passes ! If I had 'done my duty' like the enchanted fish leaping on the gridiron, and seen you never again after that first visit, you would have forgotten all about me by this day. Or at least, 'that prude' I should be ! Somewhere under your feet, I should be put down by this day ! Yes ! and my enchanted dog would be coursing 'some small deer' . . . some unicorn of a 'golden horn,' . . . (*not* the Kilmansegg gold !) out of hearing if I should have a mind to whistle ever so, . . . but out of harm's way perhaps besides.

"Well, I do think of it sometimes as you see. Which proves that I love you better than myself by the whole width of the Heavens ; the sevenfold Heavens. Yet I think again how He of the heavens and earth brought us together so wonderfully, holding two souls in His hand. If my fault was in it, my *will* at least was not. Believe it of me, dear dearest, that I who am as clear-sighted as other women, . . . and not more humble (as to the approaches of common men), was quite resolutely blind when *you* came—I could not understand the possibility of *that*. It was too much . . . too surpassing. And so it will seem to the end. The astonishment, I mean, will not cease to be. It is my own especial fairy-tale . . . from the spells of which, may you be unharmed . . . !

How one writes and writes over and over the same thing ! But day by day the same sun rises, . . . over, and over, and nobody is tired. May God bless you, dearest of all, and justify what has been by what shall be, . . . and let me be free of spoiling any sun of yours ! Shall you ever tell me in your thoughts, I wonder, to get out of your sun ? No—no—Love keeps love too safe ! and I have faith, you see, as a grain of mustard-seed ! ”

She writes on April 3—

“ Dearest, your flowers make the whole room look like April, they are so full of colours . . . growing fuller and fuller as we get nearer to the sun. The wind was melancholy too, all last night—oh, I think the wind melancholy, just as *you* do,—or *more* than you do perhaps for having spent so many restless days and nights close on the sea-shore in Devonshire. I seem now always to hear the sea *in* the wind, voice within voice ! But I like a sudden wind not too loud,—a wind which you hear the rain in rather than the sea—and I like the half cloudy half sunny April weather, such as we have it here in England, with a west or south wind—I like and enjoy *that*; and remember vividly how I used to like to walk or wade nearly up to my waist in the wet grass or weeds, with the sun overhead, and the wind darkening or lightening the verdure all round.

“ But none of it was happiness, dearest dearest. Happiness does not come with the sun or the rain. Since my illness, when the door of the future seemed shut and locked before my face, and I did not tire myself with knocking any more, I thought I was happier, happy, I

thought, just because I was tranquil *unto death*. Now I know life from death, . . . and the unsorrowful life for the first time since I was a woman; though I sit here on the edge of a precipice in a position full of anxiety and danger. What matter, . . . if one shuts one's eyes, and listens to the birds singing? Do you know, I am glad—I could almost thank God—that Papa keeps so far from me . . . that he has given up coming in the evening . . . I could almost thank God. If he were affectionate, and made me, or *let* me, feel myself necessary to him, . . . how should I bear (even with my reason on my side) to prepare to give him pain? So that the Pisa business last year, by sounding the waters, was good in its way . . . and the pang that came with it to me, was also good. He feels!—he loves me . . . but it is not (this, I mean to say) to the *trying* degrees of feeling and love . . . trying to *me*. Ah, well! In any case, I should have ended probably, in giving up all for you—I do not profess otherwise. I used to think I should, if ever I loved anyone—and if the love of you is different from, it is greater than, anything preconceived . . . divined."

The last extract illustrates a well-known mood, not always very agreeable to contemplate, but very easy to understand. It was impossible for her, as she sat guarding her secret, to look with interest at anything else. In the first brilliant flood of passion, the rest of the world was drained of its brightness, unless it could reflect the brightness which she hid. The result of the sudden enticing of all her thoughts and desires in one direction was to deprive the rest of her outlook of its significance. Her

love of her father, it is true, had long had more pain than pleasure in it ; but at least it had had pain ; by this time it had almost become indifferent. Her friends, too, even the well-beloved Miss Mitford, were an interruption almost too tiresome to be borne.

“ Well !—and to-morrow morning Miss Mitford comes to spend the day like the kind dear friend she is ; and I, not the least in the world glad to see her ! Why have you turned my heart into such hard porphyry ? Once, when it was plain clay, every finger (of these womanly fingers) left a mark on it—and now, . . . you see ! Even Mrs. Jameson makes me grateful to her chiefly (as I know in myself) because she sees you as you are in part, and will forgive me for loving you as soon as she hears of it . . . however she may, and must consistently, expect us to torment one another, according to the way of the ‘artistic temperament,’ evermore, and ever more and more. But for the rest, the others who do not know you and value you . . . *I hate to see them . . .* and there’s the truth ! There is something too in the concealment, the reserve, the doubleness enforced on occasion ! . . . which is painful and hateful. Detestable it all is.”

As for dear Mr. Kenyon, the sense of his vigilant benevolent gaze became a positive terror. He was the one person whose insight she was most afraid of. There was no pleasure in his company now. A proposal from him to come and see her meant a whole maze of flurried scheming, and the immediate postponement of Browning’s next visit, in case they should coincide and the innocent gentleman should guess how often he came. Indeed, the

casuistries they spin in order to make him think it is Saturday week, for example, and not next Saturday that he is coming again, bewilder even themselves. They land themselves continually in fine embarrassments in their desire to mislead him ; and if Mr. Kenyon did not again and again suspect the truth, he was certainly a very unsophisticated man. All this seems hard on the good friend to whom their acquaintance had been primarily due. But Elizabeth's particular terror of him was not without cause. With all his benignant indulgence, he was famous for his practical good sense ; and she was dreadfully conscious that his disapproval of their marriage—she was sure he would disapprove—would have much semblance of justice about it. He would not put himself in the wrong, by gross cruelty, like her father, but he would shake his head, so she felt, at the sight of the worn invalid fastening herself to the brilliant, ambitious man ; and there was a grain of truth in this picture—at any rate she thought so—that made it impossible for her to face his quiet disapproval. Moreover, with him disapproval would probably take a practical form of quite unthinkable awfulness. He would appeal to each of them to give up the other for the other's sake, the one argument that it would be impossible for either to resist ; and she shrank in every nerve from the risk of being put to such a test. There were other considerations too—

"As for telling Mr. Kenyon, it is most unadvisable, both for his sake and ours. Did you never hear him talk of his organ of caution ? We should involve him in ever so many fears for us, and force him to have his share of the

odium at last. Papa would not speak to him again while he lived. And people might say, ‘Mr. Kenyon did it all.’ No—if we are to be selfwilled, let us be selfwilled . . . at least, let *me!* for you, of course, are free to follow your judgment in respect to your own friends. And then, it is rather a matter of feeling with me after all, that as I *cannot* give my confidence to my father, I should refuse it to others. I feel *that* a little.”

Such was the tangle of cobwebs in which this intricate piece of deception involved a pair of people extremely unversed in the art. Their firm knowledge that it was all unavoidable saved them from self-reproach; but the vexation weighed heavily upon her, and had its part in undermining for the time being her old affections among her family and friends. When at last they threw it off, and gained firm and open ground in marriage, all this righted itself; but in the mean time it was inevitable that there should be a certain loss and discoloration of ordinary feelings.

She was beset, moreover, not only by friends to whom she could not show affection, but by strangers to whom she could barely show civility. Her public, naturally ignorant of the fact that she herself had forgotten them, had by no means forgotten her. In a letter to Browning of May 22, she breaks out with considerable spirit—

“Why I had a manuscript sonnet sent to me last autumn by ‘person or persons unknown,’ . . . ‘To EBB on her departure from England to Pisa.’ Can you fancy that melodious piece of gossiping? Then a lady of the city, famous, I believe, for haberdashery, used to address

all her poems to me—which really was original . . . for she would write five or six ‘poems’ on an evening, and sweep them up and send them to me once a fortnight, upon faith, hope and charity, seaweed and moonshine, cornlaws and the immortality of the soul, and take me for her standing muse, properly *thou’d* and *thee’d* all through. What a good vengeance it would be upon your unjust charges, if I set you to read a volume or two of those ‘poems’ . . . which all went into the fire—so you need not be frightened !

“And to-day I had a rose-tree sent to me by somebody who has laid close siege to me this long while, and whom I have escaped hitherto . . . but who has encamped, she says, ‘till July’ in 16 Wimpole Street. She writes too on her card . . . ‘When are you going to Italy?’

“Ah ! you, who blame me (half blame me) for ‘seeing women,’ do not know how difficult it is to help it sometimes, without being in appearance ungrateful and almost brutal. Just because I am unwell, they tease me more, I believe. Now that Miss Heaton . . . oh, I need not go back, but it was not of my choice, be sure. You being a man are different,—and perhaps you make people afraid and keep them off. They do not thrust their hands through the bars where the lion is, as they do with the giraffe. Once I had this proposition—‘If we mayn’t come in, *will you stand up at the window that we may see?*’ Now!—And there’s the essence of at least ten MS. sonnets!—so don’t complain any more.”

But all these exasperations could not prevent the weeks from wearing steadily away ; the winter ended, as it had

begun, with beneficent mildness, and the spring found her ready to take advantage of the first real warmth to achieve the momentous step of going out of doors. In her letter of May 11, she encloses a stalk of laburnum flower.

"Look what is inside of this letter—look! I gathered it for you to-day when I was walking in the Regent's Park. Are you surprised? Arabel and Flush and I were in the carriage—and the sun was shining with that green light through the trees, as if he carried down with him the very essence of the leaves, to the ground, . . . and I wished so much to walk through a half open gate along a shaded path, that we stopped the carriage and got out and walked, and I put both my feet on the grass, . . . which was the strangest feeling! . . . and gathered this laburnum for you. It hung quite high up on the tree, the little blossom did, and Arabel said that certainly I could not reach it—but you see! It is a too generous return for all your flowers: or, to speak seriously, a proof that I thought of you and wished for you—which it was natural to do, for I never enjoyed any of my excursions as I did to-day's—the standing under the trees and on the grass, was so delightful. It was like a bit of that Dreamland which is your especial dominion,—and I felt joyful enough for the moment, to look round for you, as for the cause. It seemed *illogical*, not to see you close by. And you were not far after all, if thoughts count as bringers near. Dearest, we shall walk together under the trees some day!"

"And all those strange people moving about like phantoms of life. How wonderful it looked to me!—and only

you, . . . the idea of you . . . and myself seemed to be real there ! And Flush a little, too !—”

By this time the anniversary of their first meeting has been reached, and I must quote the letter that each writes upon this tender day of memories. His first—

“Tuesday.

“[Post-mark, May 19, 1846.]

“With this day expires the first year since you have been yourself to me—putting aside the anticipations, and prognostications, and even assurances from all reasons short of absolute sight and hearing,—excluding the five or six months of these, there remains a year of this intimacy. You accuse me of talking extravagantly sometimes. I will be quiet here,—is the tone *too* subdued if I say, such a life—made up of such years—I would deliberately take rather than any other imaginable one in which fame and worldly prosperity and the love of the whole human race should combine, excluding ‘that of yours—to which I hearken’—only wishing the rest were there for a moment that you might see and know that I did turn from them to you. My dearest, inexpressibly dearest. How can I thank you ? I feel sure you *need* not have been so kind to me, so perfectly kind and good,—I should have remained your own, gratefully, entirely your own, through the bare permission to love you, or even without it—seeing that I never dreamed of stipulating at the beginning for ‘a return,’ and ‘reward,’—but I also believe, joyfully, that no course but the course you have taken would have raised me above my very self, as I feel on looking back. I began by loving you in

comparison with all the world,—now, I love you, my Ba, in the face of your past self, as I remember it."

On the same evening she writes—

"Do you remember how, when poor Abou Hassan, in the Arabian story, awakens from sleep in the Sultan's chamber, to the sound of instruments of music, he is presently complimented by the grand vizier on the royal wisdom displayed throughout his reign . . . do you remember? Because just as he listened, do *I* listen, when you talk to me about 'the course I have taken' . . . *I*, who have just had the wit to sit still in my chair with my eyes half shut, and dream . . . dream!—Ah, whether I am asleep or awake, what do I know . . . even now? As to the 'course I have taken,' it has been somewhere among the stars . . . or under the trees of the Hesperides, at lowest. . . .

"Why how can I write to you such foolishness? Rather I should be serious, grave, and keep away from myths and images, and speak the truth plainly. And speaking the truth plainly, I, when I look back, dearest beloved, see that you have done for me everything, instead of my doing anything for you—that you have lifted me . . . Can I speak? Heavens!—how I had different thoughts of you and of myself and of the world and of life, last year at this hour! The spirits who look backward over the grave, cannot feel much otherwise from my feeling as I look back. As to *your* thanking *me*, that is monstrous, it seems to me. It is the action of your own heart alone, which has appeared to do you any good. For myself, if I do not spoil your life, it is the nearest to deserving thanks that I can come. Think what I was when you saw me first . . . laid there on the

sofa as an object of the merest compassion ! and of a sadder spirit than even the face showed ! and then think of all your generosity and persistence in goodness. Think of it ! —shall I ever cease ? Not while the heart beats, which beats for you.

“And now as the year has rounded itself to ‘the perfect round,’ I will speak of that first letter, about which so many words were, . . . just to say, this time, that I am glad now, yes, glad, . . . as we were to have a miracle, . . . to have it *so*, a born-miracle from the beginning. I feel glad, now, that nothing was *between* the knowing and the loving . . . and that the beloved eyes were never cold discerners and analyzers of me at any time. I am glad and grateful to you, my own altogether dearest ! Yet the letter was read in pain and agitation, and you have scarcely guessed how much. I could not sleep night after night, —could not,—and my fear was at nights, lest the feverishness should make me talk deliriously and tell the secret aloud. Judge if the deeps of my heart were not shaken. From the first you had that power over me, notwithstanding those convictions which I also had, and which you know.

“For it was not the character of the letter apart from you, which shook me,—I could prove that to you—I received and answered very calmly, with most absolute calmness, a letter of the kind last summer . . . knowing in respect to the writer of it, (just as I thought of *you*), that a moment’s enthusiasm had carried him a good way past his discretion. I am sure that he was perfectly satisfied with my way of answering his letter . . . as I was myself. But *you . . . you . . .* I could not escape so from *you*. You were

stronger than I, from the beginning, and I felt the mastery in you by the first word and first look.

“Dearest and most generous. No man was ever like you, I know ! May God keep me from laying a blot on one day of yours !—on one hour ! and rather blot out mine !

“For my life, it is yours, as this year has been yours. But how can it make you happy, such a thing as my life ? *There*, I wonder still. It never made *me* happy, without you !—

“Your very own
“BA.”

In turning these pages which admit the reader to such extraordinary intimacy, one longs to press closer still, to bridge the distance which separates them as they write, to catch sight of the long luxurious visits, which hang like dark stars at close intervals among the letters. There are continual references to them, of course ; when they have been together in the afternoon, both of them will write in the evening, catching up some word that has fallen between them, following out some topic, or multiplying explanations in the sudden fear that something may have been misunderstood. Yet it is easy to forget them too, because it seems as if the letters must contain all that either can have to say on all subjects. There hardly seem to be any real lacunæ ; only from time to time an abrupt transition or a reference to something that has not appeared before, indicates that they have met since the last letter. The record of his visits was kept by Browning with characteristic succinctness. The day and hour are entered as they occur, on the backs of her letters, with a number to show how often he has now

seen her. On her side a less compressed record was growing under her hands, though Browning had no idea of that. "You shall see some day at Pisa," she writes in July, "what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is a time to read what is written'? If he doesn't, he ought." This is the only hint she gives of those passionate sonnets which he did in fact see at Pisa, and not before. She wrote no other poetry at this time; when Browning questioned her on the point, she answered by wondering whether St. Paul had worked much at tent-making for a time after that burst of light on the road to Damascus. Moreover, the freer life she had begun to lead physically, far freer than she had known for years, with constant excursions to the drawing-room, and occasional drives and even walks out of doors, had introduced another new excitement into her life of monotony. All this was very different from the time when she had lain week after week on the sofa of her room, with little to do or think of but her literary work; and it is natural that during these months we should hear nothing of any new poetry of her own. Indeed in her letters to Browning she writes in all sincerity as if *he* were the acknowledged genius, and she merely a sympathetic admirer. This was an exact reversal of the general view. To the ordinary public it was she who was the great poet, the learned muse with whom the literary luminaries of the day were proud to correspond, to whom the Miss Codgers and Mrs. Hominies of America addressed their effusions. Browning, though recognized to some extent in America, was little known even in the most cultured circles in England. It is true that a few people, of whom D. G. Rossetti, with his strong instinct

for the stuff of poetry, was one, had fastened with admiration on the medieval richness and allusiveness of the “Bells and Pomegranates.” But for the most part, even to the few who knew of him, he was simply a man who elected to write in an unintelligible language, when he might have written proper English like Tennyson. Elizabeth Barrett, as was shown by a certain line in “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” had admired him as a writer long before she had known him personally, and without false modesty she ranked his poetry far above her own,—a judgment that at that time would have appeared a mere fantasy, a natural *élan* of generosity on the part of a woman very much in love. It was his marriage, not his books, that first brought Browning into prominence.

As the summer went forward the prospect of Italy in the autumn became steadily more definite, and they began to discuss the relative merits of different places for their retreat. Browning knew the country well already, and he supplied the results of his experience, while she turned over guide-books and warily collected the opinions of her friends. She kept faithfully to her promise that she would abide by his decision when it came to settling the time of their marriage; but with more thought of him than of herself, she was anxious that the decision should not be made precipitately. Early in June she writes—

“Now, I am going to ask you a question, dearest of mine, and you will consider it carefully and examine your own wishes in respect to it, before I have any answer. In fact it is not necessary to treat of the subject of it at all at this moment—we have a great deal of time before us. Still,

I want to know whether, upon reflection, you see it to be wise and better for me to go to Italy with Miss Bayley, or with any other person who may be willing to take me, (supposing I should find such a plan possible) and that you should follow with Mr. Chorley or alone, . . . leaving other thoughts for another year. Or if I find this scheme, as far as I am concerned, impossible, shall we gain anything, do you think, on any side of the question that you can see, by remaining quietly as we are, you at New Cross, and I here, until next year's summer or autumn? Shall we be wiser, more prudent, for any reason, or in any degree by such a delay?

"It is the question I ask you—it is no proposal of mine, understand—nor shall I tell you my own impression about it. I have told you that I would do as you should decide, and I will do that and no other. Only on that very account it is the more necessary that you should decide well, and according to the best lights of your own judgment and reason."

He answers the next day—

"I will tell you, dearest : your good is my good, and your will mine ; if you were convinced *that* good would be promoted by our remaining as we are for twenty years instead of one, I should endeavour to submit in the end . . . after the natural attempts to find out and remove the imagined obstacle. If, as you seem to do here, you turn and ask about *my* good—yours being supposed to be uninfluenced by what I answer . . . then, here is my TRUTH on that subject, in that view,—my good for myself. Every day that passes before *that day* is one the more of hardly

endurable anxiety and irritation, to say the least ; and the thought of another year's intervention of hope deferred—altogether intolerable ! Is there anything I can do in that year—or that you can do—to forward our object ? Anything impossible to be done sooner ? If not—

“ You may misunderstand me now at first, dear, dearest Ba ; at first I sate quietly, you thought ; do I live quietly now, do you think ? Ought I to show the evidence of the unselfishness, I *strive*, at least, to associate with my love, by coolly informing you ‘ what would please me ’ ?

“ But I will not say more, you must know . . . and *I* seem to know that this question was one of Ba’s old questions . . . a branch-licence, perhaps, of the original inestimable one, that charter of my liberties, by which I am empowered to ‘ hold myself unengaged, unbound,’ &c., &c.

“ Good Heaven ; I would not,—even to save the being asked such questions,—have played the horseleech that cries ‘ give, give,’ in Solomon’s phrase—‘ Do you let me see you once a week ? Give me a sight once a day !—May I dare kiss you ? Let me marry you to-morrow ! ’

“ But to the end, the very end, I am yours : God knows I would not do you harm for worlds—worlds ! I may easily mistake what *is* harm or not. I will ask your leave to speak—at your foot, my Ba : I would not have dared to take the blessing of kissing your hand, much less your lip, but that it seemed as if I was leading you into a mistake—as did happen—and that you might fancy I only felt a dreamy, abstract passion for a phantom of my own creating out of your books and letters, and which only took your name. . . . *That* once understood, the rest you shall give me. In every event, I am your own.”

She does not attempt to dispute his answer—

“ Nothing at all had it to do with your Magna Charta, beloved, that question of mine. After you were gone the other day and I began turning your words over and over, . . . (*so*, I make hay of them to feed the horses of the sun !) it struck me that you had perhaps an instinct of common sense, which, with a hand I did not see and a voice I could not hear, drew you perhaps. So I thought I would ask. For after all, this is rather a serious matter we are upon, and if you think that you are not to have your share of responsibility . . . that you are not to consider and arrange and decide, and perform your own part, . . . you are as much mistaken as ever *I* was. ‘ Judge what I say.’ For my part, I have done, it seems to me, nearly as much as I can do. I do not, at least, seem to myself to have any power to *doubt* even, of the path to choose for the future. If for any reason you had seen wisdom in delay, it would have been a different thing—and the seeing was a *possible* thing, you will admit. I did not ask you if you *desired* a delay, but if you saw a reason for it. In the mean time I was absolutely yours, I remembered thoroughly, . . . and the question went simply to enquire what you thought it best to do with your own.

“ For me I agree with your view—I never once thought of proposing a delay on my own account. We are standing on hot scythes, and because we do not burn in the feet, by a miracle, we have no right to count on the miracle’s prolongation. Then nothing is to be gained—and everything may be lost—and the sense of mask-wearing for another year would be suffocating. This for *me*. And for yourself,

I shall not be much younger or better otherwise, I suppose, next year. I make no motion, then, for a delay, further than we have talked of, . . . to the summer's end.

"My good . . . happiness! Have I any that did not come from you, that is not *in* you, that you should talk of my good apart from yours? I shudder to look back to the days when you were not for me. Was ever life so like death before? My face was so close against the tombstones, that there seemed no room even for the tears. And it is unexampled generosity of yours, that, having done all for me, you should write as you always do, about *my giving* . . . giving! Among the sons of men there is none like you as I believe and know, . . . and every now and then declare to my sisters."

So the decision was ratified that they should be married at the end of the summer, and details only remained to be settled. She had no more misgivings on the subject of her health. Between the propitious weather and the new impulse she now had for desiring recovery, her strength had increased enough to remove that bar to their marriage; and since the autumn she had acquiesced in Browning's eager claim that there could be no other.

"This is the first word I have written out of my room, these five years, I think," she writes on June 6. "I am writing now in the back drawing-room, half out of the window for air, driven out of my own territory by the angel of the sun this morning."

It is easy by this time to see that their perpetual subterfuges and precautions are becoming a burden to them. They do not write with the same serene expansion

as before. A sense of being fussed and hurried obtrudes itself, and indicates that the strain of their situation was telling on them both. There are continual alarms that their secret is leaking out. Her brothers have said something, or Mrs. Jameson has hinted something, or Mr. Kenyon, by a word he has let drop, seems to have guessed something : all such occurrences are anxiously debated ; the air thickens with doubts and dangers. It was impossible that such a state of things could be borne for long ; and Browning breaks out now and then with vehement wishes to rend the mystery once for all and carry her off to Italy. But they both felt that the end of the summer would be the right time, when they could fly at once to Italy for the winter, and till then secrecy was a necessity. Though her brothers had their suspicions, she would not make it possible for her father to visit them afterwards with his wrath, as accomplices of her unpardonable crime. Her sisters indeed knew, but for the same reason she intended to keep the final details even from them. Browning had told his parents and his sister, who had acclaimed the news with delight, but he was not allowed to breathe a word to any one else. Mrs. Jameson's perpetual kindness and interest were hard to bear without offering confidence in return. She was always at Miss Barrett's side with offers to take her to Italy with her for the winter, and at last she was allowed to see something of the truth.

"It was no news that you did not go to Greenwich to-day,—for Mrs. Jameson came for me to drive at about six, and she and I were in Regent's Park until nearly eight. Then she went somewhere to dinner, and I, who had had

tea, came home to supper ! I like her very much—more and more, certainly—and we need not be mysterious up to the usual mark of mystery, because I told her . . . told her . . . what might be told—and she was gracious to the uttermost—not angry at all,—and said that ‘Truth was truth, and one could breathe in the atmosphere of it, and she was glad I had told her.’ Of you, she said, that she admired you more than ever—yes, more than ever—for the ‘manner in which as a man of honour you had kept the secret’—so you were praised, and I, not blamed . . . and we shall not complain, if our end is as good as our beginning.”

Another old friend reappears at this time, of whom nothing has been heard for some years.

“I forgot to tell you that yesterday I went to Mr. Boyd’s house . . . not to see him, but as a preliminary step to seeing him. Arabel went to his room to tell him of my being there—we are both perhaps rather afraid of meeting after all these years of separation. Quite blind he is—and though scarcely older than Mr. Kenyon (perhaps a year or two or three), so nervous, that he has really made himself infirm, and now he refuses to walk out or even to go down-stairs. A very peculiar life he has led ever since he lost his sight, which he did when he was quite a young man—and a very peculiar person he is in all possible ways. His great faculty is . . . *memory* . . . and his great passion . . . Greek—to which of late he has added *Ossian*. Otherwise, he talks like a man of slow mind, which he is, . . . and with a child’s way of looking at things, such as would make you smile—oh, he talks in

the most wonderfully childish way ! Poor Mr. Boyd. He cares for me perhaps more than he cares for any one else . . . far more than for his own only daughter ; but he is not a man of deep sensibility, and, if he heard of my death, would merely sleep a little sounder the next night. Once he said to me that whenever he felt sorry about anything, he was inclined to go to sleep. An affectionate and grateful regard . . . grateful for many kindnesses . . . I bear him, for my part. He says that I should wear the crown in poetry, if I would but follow Pope—but that the dreadful system of running lines one into another ruins everything. When I talk of *memory*, I mean merely the mechanical faculty. The *associative*, which makes the other a high power, he wants. So I went to his house in St. John's Wood yesterday, and saw the little garden. Poor Mr. Boyd. There, he lives, all alone—and never leaving his chair ! yet cheerful still, I hear, in all that desolation. As for you and Tennyson, he never heard of you . . . he never guesses at the way of modern literature . . . and it is the intense compliment to me when he reads verses of mine, ‘ notwithstanding my corrupt taste,’ . . . to quote his own words.”

And again a few days later—

“ In the carriage, to-day, I went first to Mr. Kenyon’s, and, as he was not at home, left a card for a footstep. Then Arabel and Flush and I proceeded on our way to Mr. Boyd’s in St. John’s Wood, and I was so nervous . . . so anxious for an excuse for turning back . . . that . . . can you guess what Arabel said to me ? ‘ Oh Ba ’ ; she said, ‘ such a coward as *you* are, never will be . . . married,

while the world lasts.' Which made me laugh if it did not make me persevere—for you see by it what her notion is of an heroic deed! So, there, I stood at last, at the door of poor Mr. Boyd's dark little room, and saw him sitting . . . as if he had not moved these seven years—these seven heavy, changeful years. Seeing him, my heart was too full to speak at first, but I stooped and kissed his poor bent-down forehead, which he never lifts up, his chin being quite buried in his breast. Presently we began to talk of Ossian and Cyprus wine, and I was forced, as I would not have Ossian for a god, to take a little of the Cyprus,—there was no help for me, nor alternative: so I took as little as I could, while he went on proving to me that the Adamic fall and corruption of human nature (Mr. Boyd is a great theologian) were never in any single instance so disgustingly exemplified as in the *literary controversy about Ossian*; every man of the Highland Society having a lost soul in him; and Walter Scott . . . oh, the woman who poisoned all her children the other day, is a saint to Walter Scott, . . . so we need not talk of him any more. ‘Arabel!—how much has she taken of that wine? not half a glass.’ ‘But Mr. Boyd, you would not have me be obliged to carry her home.’”

I will give here out of its place, an extract from a letter written some weeks later (in August), to complete the account of this odd old friend's re-entry into our story.

“Talking of confidences, I neglected to tell you when you were here last, that one more had escaped us. It was not by my choice, if by my fault. I wrote something

in a note to Mr. Boyd some weeks ago, which nobody except himself would have paused to think over ; but he, like a prisoner in a dungeon, sounds every stone of the walls round him, and discerns a hollowness, detects a wooden beam, . . . patiently pricks out the mortar with a pin—all this, in his rayless, companionless Dark,—poor Mr. Boyd ! The time before I last went to see him, he asked me if I were going to be a nun—there, was the first guess ! On the next visit he puts his question precisely right—I tried to evade—then, promised to be frank in a little time—but being pressed on all sides, and drawn on by a solemn vow of secrecy, I allowed him to see the truth—and he lives such an isolated life, that it is perfectly safe with him, setting the oath aside. Also, he was very good and kind, and approved highly of the whole, and exhorted me, with ever such exhortation, to keep to my purpose, and to allow no consideration in the world or out of the world, to make any difference—quoting the moral philosophers as to the rights of such questions. Is there harm in his knowing ? He knows nobody, talks to nobody, and is very faithful to his word. Just as *I*, you will retort, was foolish in mine ! Yet I assure you, mine was a sort of word, which to nine hundred and ninety-nine persons, would have suggested nothing—only *he* mused over it, turned it into all lights, and had nothing to do but *that*. Afterwards he was proud, and asked. . . . ‘Was I not acute ?’ It was a pleasure to him, one could not grudge.”

A memorable excursion was taken at this time with Mr. Kenyon to see a sight new and terrible to her, the arrival of

the Great Western Train at Paddington. Still greater events were a visit to Westminster Abbey, and another, arranged by Mrs. Jameson, to see the famous collection of books and pictures belonging to the poet Rogers. Her account of this last is worth quoting for the delight it shows in such an unwonted little piece of sight-seeing, and for the naive freshness of the impressions made by the great names which she had had so little opportunity of knowing—

“ Monday Evening.
“ [Post-mark, June 23, 1846.]

“ Well—I did look everywhere for you to-day,—but not more than I always do—always I do, when I go out, look for you in the streets . . . round the corners ! And Mrs. Jameson came *alone* and she and I were alone at Mr. Rogers’s, and you must help me to thank her some day for her unspeakable kindness to me, though she did not leap to the height of the inspiration of managing to let us see those pictures together. Ah—if she had, it would have been too much. As it is, she gave me a great deal of pleasure in the kindest of way . . . and I let it *be* pleasure, by mixing it with enough thoughts of you—(otherwise how could it be pleasure ?)—and she showed the pictures, and instructed me, really taking pains and instructing me . . . and telling me how Rubens painted landscapes . . . as how should my ignorance guess ? . . . and various other unknown things. The first word as we reached the door, frightened me—for she said that perhaps we might see Mr. Rogers . . . which was a little beyond our covenant—but we did not see him, and I suppose the Antinous on the staircase is not at all like him. Grand it is, in its serene beauty. On a

colossal scale, in white marble. For the pictures, they are full of wonder and divinity—each giving the measure of a man's soul. And think . . . sketches from the hand of Michael Angelo and Raphael ! And a statuette in clay, alive with the life of Michael Angelo's finger—the blind eyes looking . . . seeing . . . as if in scorn of all clay ! And the union of energy and meditation in the whole attitude ! You have seen the marble of that figure in Florence. Then, a divine Virgin and child, worn and faded to a shadow of Raphael's genius, as Mrs. Jameson explained to me—and the famous 'Ecce Homo' of Guido . . . and Rubens' magnificent '*version*,' as she called it, of Andrea Mantegna's 'Triumph of Julius Cæsar.' So triumphing to this day ! And Titian, and Tintoretto . . . and what did not strike me the least, . . . a portrait of Rembrandt by himself, which if his landscapes, as they say, were 'dug out of nature,' looks as if it were dug out of humanity. Such a rugged, dark, deep subterraneous face, . . . yet inspired— ! seeming to realize that God took clay and breathed into the nostrils of it. There are both the clay, and the divinity ! And think ! I saw the agreement between the bookseller and Milton for the sale of 'Paradise Lost' ! with Milton's signature and seal ! and '*Witnessed by William Greene, Mr. Milton's servant.*' How was it possible not to feel giddy with such sights ! Almost I could have run my head against the wall, I felt, with bewilderment—and Mrs. Jameson must have been edified, I have thought since, through my intense stupidity. I saw too the first edition of 'Paradise Lost.' The rooms are elegant, with no pretension to splendour . . . which is good taste, a *part* of the good taste everywhere. Only,

on the chimney-piece of the dining-room, were two small busts, beautiful busts, white with marble, . . . and representing—now, whom, of gods and men, would you select for your Lares . . . to help your digestion and social merriment? . . . Caligula and Nero in *childhood*! The *childhood* is horribly suggestive to me! On the side-board is Pope's bust, by Roubillac—a too expressive, miserable face—drawn with disease and bitter thoughts, and very painful, I felt, to look at. These things I liked least, in the selection and arrangement. Everything beside was admirable: and I write and write of it all as if I were not tired—but I am . . . and most with the excitement and newness."

Among Miss Barrett's many correspondents was the painter, Benjamin Robert Haydon. They never met, but they had reached some intimacy by letter—indeed, it appears that Haydon, with characteristic *abandon*, had rushed into greater confidential depths than Miss Barrett altogether desired; and their intercourse had lapsed. But before then she had given temporary shelter to some belongings of his which he desired to save, amid the perennial disorder of his household, from one of the periodic onslaughts of his creditors. In June of this year, 1846, after many months of silence, the same thing happened again, and once more several boxes of his papers and pictures were stacked in the Wimpole Street house. A week later the news came that he had committed suicide, and the shock to Miss Barrett was very great. She writes on June 23—

"Oh yes—it has shocked me, this dreadful news of

poor Mr. Haydon—it chilled the blood in my veins when I heard it from Alfred, who, seeing the *Times* at the Great Western Terminus, wrote out the bare extract and sent it to me by the post. He just thought that the *Chronicle* did not mention it, . . . and that I had not seen Mr. Haydon . . . he did not perhaps think how it would shock me.

“For, *this* I cannot help thinking. Could anyone—*could my own hand even . . . have averted what has happened?* My head and heart have ached to-day over the inactive hand! But, for the moment, it was out of my power, without an application where it would have been useless—and then, I never fancied this case to be more than a piece of a continuous case . . . of a habit fixed. Two years ago he sent me boxes and pictures precisely so, and took them back again—poor, poor Haydon!—as he will not this time. And he said last week that Peel had sent him fifty pounds . . . adding . . . ‘I do not, however, want *charity*, but *employment*.’ Also, I have been told again and again (oh, never by *you*, my beloved!) that to give money *there*, was to drop it into a hole of the ground.

“But if to have dropped it so, dust to dust, would have saved a living man—what then?

“Yet of the three notes I had from him last week, the first was written so lightly, that the second came to desire me not to attribute to him a ‘want of feeling.’ And who could think . . . contemplate . . . this calamity? May God have mercy on the strongest of us, for we are weak. Oh, that a man so high hearted and highly endowed . . . a bold man who has thrown down gauntlet after gauntlet in the face of the world—that such a man should go mad

for a few paltry pounds ! For he was *mad* if he killed himself ! of that I am as sure as if I knew it. If he killed himself, he was mad first.

“ Some day, when I have the heart to look for it, you shall see his last note. I understand now that there are touches in it of a desperate pathos—but never could he have meditated self-destruction while writing that note. He said he should write six sets of lectures more . . . six more volumes. He said he was painting a new background to a picture, which made him ‘feel as if his soul had wings.’ And then he hoped his brain would not turn. And he ‘gloried’ in the naval dangers of his son at sea. And he repeated an old phrase of his, which I had heard from him often before, and which now rings hollowly to the ears of my memory . . . that he *couldn’t and wouldn’t die*. Strange and dreadful !

“ It is nearly two years since we had a correspondence of some few months—from which at last I receded, notwithstanding the individuality and spirit of his letters, and my admiration for a certain fervour and magnanimity of genius, no one could deny to him. His very faults partook of that nobleness. But for a year and a half or more perhaps, I scarcely have written or heard from him—until last week when he wrote to ask for a shelter for his boxes and pictures. If you had inquired of me the week before, I might have answered that I did not *wish to renew the intercourse*—yet who could help being shocked and saddened ? *Would* it have availed, to have dropped something into that ‘hole in the ground’? Oh, to imagine *that*! Yet a little would have been but as nothing!—and he did not ask even for a little—and I should have been ashamed

to have offered but a little. Yet I cannot turn the thought away—that *I did not offer.*"

The consignment of papers became a real anxiety soon afterwards when it appeared that Haydon had bequeathed them all to Miss Barrett, with a request that she would make arrangements for the publication of his memoirs. Any one who had known the painter's amazing audacity and recklessness knew that this would be the most delicate of tasks, demanding, if it was to be done with discretion, a wide knowledge of the world in which Haydon had battled and raved with such indomitable vehemence,—an extravagant figure, half heroic, half farcical. Miss Barrett felt herself absolutely unfitted to be his literary executor, even if she had had no other claims upon her time in the near future; moreover, there was some suspicion that she had only been selected because her inexperience had been counted upon to publish the manuscript in its entirety, without the omissions which an editor aware of the possibilities of giving offence would be certain to make. Browning came to the rescue, and extricated her from the difficulty with tact and promptness. But the episode added its weight to the anxieties of this harassing time.

The house was now full of relations, and Elizabeth felt herself riddled by their relentless eyes. Browning's visits, which now took place at intervals of less than a week, were liable to constant postponements, and hardly a day passed without some terrible incident—some embarrassing question from her aunt, or some topic of conversation crowded with pitfalls. This is the kind of thing—

"At dinner my aunt said to Papa . . . 'I have not

seen Ba all day—and when I went to her room, to my astonishment a gentleman was sitting there.' 'Who was *that*?' said Papa's eyes to Arabel— 'Mr. Browning called here to-day,' she answered— 'And Ba bowed her head,' continued my aunt, 'as if she meant to signify to me that I was not to come in'— 'Oh,' cried Henrietta, '*that* must have been a mistake of yours. Perhaps she meant just the contrary.' 'You should have gone in,' Papa said, 'and seen the *poet*.' Now, if she were really to do that the next time!— Yet I did not, you know, make the expelling gesture she thought she saw. Simply I was startled. As to Saturday we must try whether we cannot defend the position . . . set the guns against the approaches to right and left . . . we must try.

"In speaking too of your visit this morning, Stormy said to her . . . 'Oh Mr. Browning is a *great* friend of Ba's! He comes here twice a week—is it twice a week or once, Arabel?'"

Still, inexplicable as it seems, her father suspected nothing, even though at this very time the subject of marriage was prominent in the family. Henrietta appears to have been raising on her own account a quavering banner of revolt, stimulated by the unfilial desire to marry a Captain Surtees Cook, who has been mentioned as frequenting the house. But in connection with Elizabeth such an idea was inconceivable. She was an invalid—that was a settled fact, and for that very reason might be allowed certain freedoms that could not otherwise have been conceded her. In such a case the little formalities of disease take on a character almost hieratic, till to disturb them seems little

short of sacrilege. To Mr. Barrett at any rate it appeared impossible that any one should dream of violating a place so secure and sacrosanct ; and even with the indications of it under his very eyes, it never occurred to him to place such an interpretation on them. In a letter of July 16 his daughter writes of him, as always, with tender sympathy—

“ Dearest, if *you* feel *that*, must I not feel it more deeply ? Twice or three times lately he has said to me ‘my love’ and even ‘my puss,’ his old words before he was angry last year, . . . and I quite quailed before them as if they were so many knife-strokes. Anything but his *kindness*, I can bear now.

“ Yet I am glad that you feel *that* . . . The difficulty, (almost the despair !) has been with me, to make you understand the two ends of truth . . . both that he is *not* stone . . . and that he *is* immovable *as* stone. Perhaps only a very peculiar nature could have held so long the position he holds in his family. His hand would not lie so heavily, without a pulse in it. Then he is upright—faithful to his conscience. You would respect him . . . and love him perhaps in the end. For me, he might have been king and father over me *to* the end, if he had thought it worth while to love me openly enough—yet, even *so*, he should not have let you come too near. And you could not (*so*) have come too near—for he would have had my confidence from the beginning, and no opportunity would have been permitted to you of proving your affection for me, and I should have thought always what I thought at first. So the nightshade and the eglantine are twisted, twined, one in the other, . . . and the little pink roses lean

up against the pale poison of the berries—we cannot tear this from that, let us think of it ever so much !

“We must be humble and beseeching *afterwards* at least, and try to get forgiven— Poor Papa! I have turned it over and over in my mind, whether it would be less offensive, less *shocking* to him, if an application were made first. If I were strong, I think I should incline to it at all risks—but as it is, . . . it might . . . would, probably, . . . take away the power of action from me altogether. We should be separated, you see, from *that moment*, . . . hindered from writing . . . hindered from meeting . . . and I could evade nothing, as I am—not to say that I should have fainting fits at every lifting of his voice, through that inconvenient nervous temperament of mine which has so often made me ashamed of myself. Then . . . the positive disobedience might be a greater offence than the unauthorised act. I shut my eyes in terror sometimes. May God direct us to the best.

“Oh—do not write about this, dearest, dearest ?— I throw myself out of it into the pure, sweet, deep thought of you . . . which is the love of you always. I am yours . . . your own. I never doubt of being yours. I feel too much yours. It is might and right together. You are more to me, beside, than the whole world.”

Another topic of these weeks, as the time for the final leap draws on, is the question of the money at their disposal : a question treated with a certain high-handedness, as became two philosophers, but yet with a good deal of business-like detail too, as of people determined that their little property shall duly serve their happiness, and not obtrude its leanness at inconvenient times. Browning’s

wants were extremely small. He had been brought up neither to the earning nor the spending of money. His gentle, generous father, immensely proud of his son's talent, had dedicated him with unquestioning faith to poetry, and desired no better than to be allowed to contribute to his support in the august service. But his modest banking did not make him a rich man, and Browning the younger owed the "good free life," in which he so rejoiced, as much to his extraordinary personal abstemiousness as to the funds he drew from his father. The greatest sacrifice he could have made, that of entering some regular profession, he would have made with joy, if Miss Barrett would have allowed it; and with his masterful mind and grasp of detail he would no doubt have been a successful maker of money. But she absolutely refused any such idea. If it had been necessary, she says, they must have parted; she could not have borne to see him sacrifice his freedom, "though that you once offered it for my sake," she writes, "I never shall forget." That it was not necessary she owed to an uncle who had died ten years before, leaving her some four or five hundred pounds a year, and so making her the only one of the family who was independent of Mr. Barrett in that respect. This represented a reasonable fortune for a married couple in the happy Italy of those days, and they had no anxieties on the score of its sufficiency. Only with a good deal of circumlocution, she had one stipulation to make—

"And all this reminds me of what I have often and often mused about saying to you, and shrank back, and torn the paper now and then. . . . You know the subject

you wanted to discuss, on Saturday. Now whenever the time shall come for discussing that subject, let this be a point agreed upon by both of us. The peculiarity of our circumstances will enable us to be free of the world . . . of our friends even . . . of all observation and examination, in certain respects; now let us use the advantage which falls to us from our misfortune—and, since we must act for ourselves at last, let us resist the curiosity of the whole race of third persons . . . even the affectionate interest of such friends as dear Mr. Kenyon, . . . and put it into the power of nobody to say to himself or to another, . . . ‘she had so much, and he, so much, in worldly possessions—or she had not so much and he had not so much.’ Try to understand what I mean. As it is not of the least importance to either of us, as long as we can live, whether the sixpence, we live by, came most from you or from me . . . and as it will be as much mine as yours, and yours as mine when we are together . . . why let us join in throwing a little dust in all the winking eyes round—oh, it is nonsense and weakness, I know—but I would rather, rather, see winking eyes than staring eyes. What has anybody to do with us? Even my own family . . . why should they *ever* see the farthest figure of *our* affairs, as to mere money? There now—it is said, . . . what I have had in my head so long to say.”

August arrived at last. In a more ordinarily constituted family some kind of general exodus from London might have been expected during the late summer. But it has already been noticed that Mr. Barrett elected to hug the town from one year’s end to another; and though there

were occasional rumours of a temporary move to the country at such times, nothing ever came of it. This year, however, the rumours were rather more definite than usual. The house needed painting and papering, and it seemed to be a matter of necessity that the family should abandon it for a time. This proposal brought the question of marriage nearer by a sudden stride. For Elizabeth to be swept off with the rest would mean the postponement of their flight until the autumn, and a consequent increase in the risks of travelling. Their plans began to crystallize now in real earnest. After many changes they came round to Pisa as the most favourable place, and their letters are now chiefly occupied in discussing the route to be selected, the prices to be paid, and the amount of baggage to be taken. Flush was not to be left behind, and after a little deliberation they decided to take Wilson, Miss Barrett's maid, a very loyal friend, on whose devoted companionship they could rely. So events began to move quickly ; the letters are full of precise detail, in which no room is left for leisurely writing on other subjects. Even so, however, they both have their own way of putting things ; when they write solely of the times of trains and steamers, an air of personality somehow hangs round it all.

In the middle of these trepidations a further blow fell. Flush was for the third time stolen by the original band of brigands, and though Miss Barrett knew well enough now where to go with the ransom, there was some hitch in the transaction which was not got over until, accompanied by Wilson, she had herself made a clandestine excursion to Whitechapel to arrange the terms. When he was safely recovered, at the cost of some six guineas, Browning

allowed himself to vent his indignation that the malefactor's plans should be fallen in with so tamely, and a fine discussion ensues in which he is delightfully worsted—

"It may be very foolish—I do not say it is not—or it may even be 'awful sin,' as Mr. Boyd sends to assure me—but I cannot endure to run cruel hazards about my poor Flush for the sake of a few guineas, or even for the sake of abstract principles of justice—I cannot. *You* say that *I* cannot, . . . but that *you would*. You would!—Ah dearest—most pattern of citizens, but *you would not*—I know you better. Your theory is far too good not to fall to pieces in practice. A man may love justice intensely; but the love of an abstract principle is not the strongest love—now is it? Let us consider a little, putting poor Flush out of the question. (You would bear, you say, to receive his head in a parcel—it would satisfy you to cut off Taylor's in return.) Do you mean to say that if the banditti came down on us in Italy and carried me off to the mountains, and, sending to you one of my ears, to show you my probable fate if you did not let them have . . . how much may I venture to say I am worth? . . . five or six scudi—is that reasonable at all?) . . . would your answer be 'Not so many crazie'; and would you wait, poised upon abstract principles, for the other ear, and the catastrophe—as was done in Spain not long ago? Would you, dearest? Because it is as well to know beforehand, perhaps."

The story approaches its end now, and must be left to them to tell, as far as possible. On Sept. 9 she writes—

"Dearest, you are a prophet, I suppose—there can be

no denying it. This night, an edict has gone out, and George is to-morrow to be on his way to take a house for a month either at Dover, Reigate, Tunbridge, . . . Papa did ‘not mind which,’ he said, and ‘you may settle it among you !!’ but he ‘must have this house empty for a month in order to its cleaning’—we are to go therefore and not delay.

“Now!—what *can* be done? It is possible that the absence may be longer than for a month, indeed it is probable—for there is much to do in painting and repairing, here in Wimpole Street, more than a month’s work they say. Decide, after thinking. I am embarrassed to the utmost degree, as to the best path to take. If we are taken away on Monday . . . what then?

“Of course I decline to give any opinion and express any preference,—as to places, I mean. It is not for my sake that we go:—if *I* had been considered at all, indeed, we should have been taken away earlier, . . . and not certainly now, when the cold season is at hand. And so much the better it is for me, that I have not, obviously, been thought of.

“Therefore decide! It seems quite too soon and too sudden for us to set out on our Italian adventure now—and perhaps even we could not compass—

“Well—but you must think for both of us. It is past twelve, and I have just a moment to seal this and entrust it to Henrietta for the morning’s post.

“More than ever beloved, I am

“Your own BA.

“I will do as you wish—understand.”

He answers next day—

“ 12 o’clock. On returning I find your note,

“ ‘ I will do as you wish—understand ’—then I understand you are in earnest. If you *do* go on Monday, our marriage will be impossible for another year—the misery ! You see what we have gained by waiting. We must be married directly and go to Italy. I will go for a licence to-day and we can be married on Saturday. I will call to-morrow at 3 and arrange everything with you. We can leave from Dover, &c., after that—but otherwise, impossible ! Inclose the ring, or a substitute—I have not a minute to spare for the post.

“ Ever your own R.”

On the next day, Sept. 11, Browning paid his ninetieth and last visit to Wimpole Street. The final arrangements were made, and her letter, written that evening, is endorsed in Browning’s handwriting, “ Saturday, Septr. 12, 1846, $\frac{1}{4}$ 11–11 $\frac{1}{4}$ A.M. (91).” That is his record of their marriage, which took place at Marylebone Church, and made the ninety-first time they had met. They had agreed that it would be madness for her to travel on a day of such excitement ; she was to return home for a few days to recover her strength. That same afternoon she wrote—

“ Saturday, Sept. 12.—4 $\frac{1}{2}$ p.m.

“ [Post-mark, September 12, 1846.]

“ Ever dearest, I write a word that you may read it and know how all is safe so far, and that I am not slain down-right with the day—oh, *such a day* ! I went to Mr. Boyd’s

directly, so as to send Wilson home the faster—and was able to lie quietly on the sofa in his sitting-room downstairs, before he was ready to see me, being happily engaged with a medical councillor. Then I was made to talk and take Cyprus wine,—and, my sisters delaying to come, I had some bread and butter for dinner, to keep me from looking too pale in their eyes. At last they came, and with such grave faces ! Missing me and Wilson, they had taken fright,—and Arabel had forgotten at first what I told her last night about the fly. I kept saying, ‘What nonsense, . . . what fancies you do have to be sure,’ . . . trembling in my heart with every look they cast at me. And so, to complete the bravery, I went on with them in the carriage to Hampstead . . . as far as the heath,—and talked and looked—now you shall praise me for courage—or rather you shall love me for the love which was the root of it all. How necessity makes heroes—or heroines at least ! For I did not sleep all last night, and when I first went out with Wilson to get to the fly-stand in Marylebone Street I staggered so, that we both were afraid for the fear’s sake,—but we called at a chemist’s for sal volatile and were thus enabled to go on. I spoke to her last night, and she was very kind, very affectionate, and never shrank for a moment. I told her that always I should be grateful to her.

“ You—how are you ? how is your head, ever dearest ?

“ It seems all like a dream ! When we drove past that church again, I and my sisters, there was a cloud before my eyes. Ask your mother to forgive me, Robert. If *I* had not been there, *she* would have been there, perhaps.

“ And for the rest, if either of us two is to suffer injury and sorrow for what happened there to-day—I pray that it

may all fall upon *me* ! Nor should I suffer the most pain
that way, as I know, and God knows.

“Your own

“BA.

“Was I very uncourteous to your cousin ? So kind, too, it was in him ! Can there be the least danger of the newspapers ? Are those books ever examined by penny-a-liners, do you suppose ? ”

And again the next day—

“I sit in a dream, when left to myself. I cannot believe, or understand. Oh ! but in all this difficult, embarrassing and painful situation, I look over the palms to Troy—I feel happy and exulting to belong to you, past every opposition, out of sight of every will of man—none can put us asunder, now, at least. I have a right now openly to love you, and to hear other people call it a *duty*, when I do, . . . knowing that if it were a sin, it would be done equally. Ah—I shall not be first to leave off *that*—see if I shall ! May God bless you, ever and ever dearest ! Beseech for me the indulgence of your father and mother, and ask your sister to love me. I feel so as if I had slipped down over the wall into somebody’s garden—I feel ashamed. To be grateful and affectionate to them all, while I live, is all that I can do, and it is too much a matter of course to need to be promised. Promise it however for your very own Ba whom you made so happy with the dear letter last night. But say in the next how you are—and how your mother is.

“I did hate so, to have to take off the ring ! You will have to take the trouble of putting it on again, some day.”

And the next—

“ Monday Evening.

“ [Post-mark, September 15, 1846.]

“ First, God is to be thanked for this great joy of hearing that you are better, my ever dearest—it is a joy that floats over all the other emotions. Dearest, I am so glad ! I had feared that excitement’s telling on you quite in another way. When the whole is done, and we have left England and the talkers thereof behind our backs, you will be well, steadfastly and satisfactorily, I do trust. In the mean time, there seems so much to do, that I am frightened to look towards the heaps of it. As to accoutrements, everything has been arranged as simply as possible that way—but still there are necessities—and the letters, the letters ! I am paralyzed when I think of having to write such words as . . . ‘ Papa, I am married ; I hope you will not be too displeased.’ Ah, poor Papa ! You are too sanguine if you expect any such calm from him as an assumption of indifference would imply. To the utmost, he will be angry,—he will cast me off as far from him. Well—there is no comfort in such thoughts. How I felt to-night when I saw him at seven o’clock, for the first time since Friday, and the event of Saturday ! He spoke kindly too, and asked me how I was. Once I heard of his saying of me that I was ‘ the purest woman he ever knew,’ —which made me smile at the moment, or laugh I believe, outright, because I understood perfectly what he meant by *that*—viz. that I had not troubled him with the iniquity of love affairs, or any impropriety of seeming to think about being married. But now the whole sex will go down

with me to the perdition of faith in any of us. See the effect of my wickedness!—‘Those women!’

“But we will submit, dearest. I will put myself under his feet, to be forgiven a little, . . . enough to be taken up again into his arms. I love him—he is my father—he has good and high qualities after all: he is my father *above* all. And *you*, because you are so generous and tender to me, will let me, you say, and help me to try to win back the alienated affection—for which, I thank you and bless you,—I did not thank you enough this morning. Surely I may say to him, too, . . . ‘With the exception of this act, I have submitted to the least of your wishes all my life long. Set the life against the act, and forgive me, for the sake of the daughter you once loved.’ Surely I may say *that*,—and then remind him of the long suffering I have suffered,—and entreat him to pardon the happiness which has come at last.

“And *he* will wish in return, that I had died years ago! For the storm will come and endure. And at last, perhaps, he will forgive us—it is my hope.”

Further on in the same letter she says—

“It is best, I continue to think, that you should not come here—best for *you*, because the position, if you were to try it, would be less tolerable than ever—and best for both of us, that in case the whole truth were ever discovered (I mean, of the previous marriage) we might be able to call it simply an act in order to security. I don’t know how to put my feeling into words, but I do seem to feel that it would be better, and less offensive to those whom

we offend at any rate, to avoid all possible remark on this point. It seems better to a sort of instinct I have."

A few more days followed, crowded with feverish arrangements; then the last step was precipitated by the decision that the whole family were to move into the country on Monday the 21st. The previous Saturday was at once fixed on for the flight; after some confusion of time-tables a five o'clock train from Vauxhall was discovered, to catch the night packet from Southampton. On the evening before, Elizabeth's small baggage was somehow conveyed unseen out of the house, and everything was ready for her and Wilson to meet Browning at a neighbouring bookseller's on the following afternoon. On this Friday evening she writes her last letter to Browning—

“ Friday Night,
“ [Post-mark, September 19, 1846.]

“ At from half-past three to four, then—four will not, I suppose, be too late. I will not write more— *I cannot.* By to-morrow at this time, I shall have *you* only, to love me—my beloved !

“ You *only!* As if one said *God only.* And we shall have *Him* beside, I pray of *Him*.

“ I shall send to your address at New Cross your Hanmer's poems—and the two dear books you gave me, which I do not like to leave here and am afraid of hurting by taking them with me. Will you ask *our* Sister to put the parcel into a drawer, so as to keep it for us ?

“ Your letters to me I take with me, let the ‘ounces’ cry out aloud, ever so. I *tried* to leave them, and I could

not. That is, they would not be left : it was not my fault —I will not be scolded.

“ Is this my last letter to you, ever dearest ? Oh—if I loved you less . . . a little, little less.

“ Why I should tell you that our marriage was invalid, or ought to be ; and that you should by no means come for me to-morrow. It is dreadful . . . dreadful . . . to have to give pain here by a voluntary act—for the first time in my life.

“ Remind your mother and father of me affectionately and gratefully—and your Sister too ! Would she think it too bold of me to say *our* Sister, if she had heard it on the last page ?

“ Do you pray for me to-night, Robert ! Pray for me, and love me, that I may have courage, feeling both—

“ Your own

“ BA.

“ The boxes are *safely sent*. Wilson has been perfect to me. And *I* . . . calling her ‘timid,’ and afraid of her timidity ! I begin to think that none are so bold as the timid, when they are fairly roused.”

On the next afternoon she slipped out of the house with Wilson, carrying Flush and anxiously exhorting him to silence.

Here, then, the curtain falls on this strange and exquisite story. We have followed it step by step through nearly two crowded years, hearing every least echo of their hopes, their difficulties, their resolutions. Suddenly, when after long gradations the ascending fire has reached its height,—

when the story has swept forward to its final culmination,—here on the very verge of its fulfilment we are suddenly extruded. Henceforward we shall not watch them looking at each other face to face. We shall see them only when they turn from each other to the world outside.

VI

PISA AND FLORENCE

1847-1851

DURING the summer of 1846, Mrs. Anna Jameson found that another journey to Italy would be necessary before her new book, "Sacred and Legendary Art," could be finished. A good deal more material was needed for the illustrations, and to help her in making drawings and notes, she decided to take with her a young niece of hers, Gerardine Bate. The plan by which her dear friend, Elizabeth Barrett, was to have gone with them too, had come to nothing. Mrs. Jameson had set her heart on it, but she had learnt that there were difficulties in the way. Miss Barrett's family were against the scheme for one thing, and for another, an attachment, certain to be disengaged by her father, had sprung up between her and the poet Browning, which would naturally make her unwilling to leave England for the present. Mrs. Jameson had been charmingly thanked by her friend for her kind proposals, and before her departure had received a little note, in which Miss Barrett expressed her sorrow at being unable to come to see her before she left, adding that she was "forced to be satisfied with the sofa and silence."

Leaving this friend, therefore, to her usual winter of seclusion, Mrs. Jameson and her niece set out for Italy early in September, establishing themselves on the way for a few days at Paris. They were diligently at work among the picture galleries there, when a note in Browning's writing arrived from a neighbouring hotel.

Mrs. Jameson's delight and amazement at the wonderful news which thus reached her were only equalled by the indefatigable kindness with which she sped to the help of her friends. There was no doubt that they needed help. Mrs. Browning had suffered considerably, both from the journey and from the thought of the cataclysm which she could picture in Wimpole Street. She was now lying prostrated at their hotel, and Browning, in a fever of alarm, clutched with joy at the timely assistance of Mrs. Jameson. This capable woman lost no time in transferring them from their hotel to the quiet pension in which she herself was living. She writes during these days—

"I have also here a poet and a poetess—two celebrities who have run away and married under circumstances peculiarly interesting, and such as render imprudence the height of prudence. Both excellent; but God help them! for I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world."

After a few days Mrs. Browning's strength was enough recovered to enable them to set out again, Mrs. Jameson and her niece travelling with them. They passed by easy stages through Orleans and Avignon to Marseilles. From Moulins Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford, to whom a

letter had been sent, just before their flight, making the great announcement—

“Moulins: October 2, 1846.

“I began to write to you, my beloved friend, earlier, that I might follow your kindest wishes literally, and also to thank you at once for your goodness to me, for which may God bless you. But the fatigue and agitation have been very great, and I was forced to break off—as now I dare not revert to what is behind. I will tell you more another day. At Orleans, with your kindest letter, I had one from my dearest, gracious friend Mr. Kenyon, who, in his goodness, does more than exculpate—even *approves*—he wrote a joint letter to both of us. But oh, the anguish I have gone through! You are good, you are kind. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saying to me that you would have gone to the church with me. *Yes, I know you would.* And for that very reason I forbore involving you in such a responsibility and drawing you into such a net. I took Wilson with me. I had courage to keep the secret to my sisters for their sakes, though I will tell you in strict confidence that it was known to them *potentially*, that is, the attachment and engagement were known, the necessity remaining that, for stringent reasons affecting their own tranquillity, they should be able to say at last, ‘We were not instructed in this and this.’ The dearest, fondest, most affectionate of sisters they are to me, and if the sacrifice of a life, or of all prospect of happiness, would have worked any lasting good to them, it should have been made even in the hour I left them. I knew that by the anguish I suffered in it. But a sacrifice,

without good to any one—I shrank from it. And also, it was the sacrifice of *two*. And *he*, as you say, had done everything for me, had loved me for reasons which had helped to weary me of myself, loved me heart to heart persistently—in spite of my own will—drawn me back to life and hope again when I had done with both. My life seemed to belong to him and to none other at last, and I had no power to speak a word. Have faith in me, my dearest friend, till you can know him. The intellect is so little in comparison to all the rest, to the womanly tenderness, the inexhaustible goodness, the high and noble aspiration of every hour. Temper, spirits, manners: there is not a flaw anywhere. I shut my eyes sometimes and fancy it all a dream of my guardian angel. Only, if it had been a dream, the pain of some parts of it would have awakened me before now; it is not a dream. I have borne all the emotion of fatigue miraculously well, though, of course, a good deal exhausted at times. We had intended to hurry on to the South at once, but at Paris we met Mrs. Jameson, who opened her arms to us with the most literal affectionateness, *kissed us both*, and took us by surprise by calling us ‘wise people, wild poets or not.’ Moreover, she fixed us in an apartment above her own in the Hôtel de la Ville de Paris, that I might rest for a week, and crowned the rest of her goodnesses by agreeing to accompany us to Pisa, where she was about to travel with her young niece. Therefore we are five travelling, Wilson being with me. Oh, yes, Wilson came; her attachment to me never shrank for a moment. And Flush came, and I assure you that nearly as much attention has been paid to Flush as to me from the beginning, so that he is

perfectly reconciled, and would be happy if the people at the railroads were not barbarians, and immovable in their evil designs of shutting him up in a box when we travel that way.

“ You understand now, ever dearest Miss Mitford, how the pause has come about writing. The week at Paris! Such a strange week it was, altogether like a vision. Whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell scarcely. Our Balzac should be flattered beyond measure by my thinking of him at all. Which I did, but of *you* more. I will write and tell you more about Paris. You should go there indeed. And to our hotel, if at all. Once we were at the Louvre, but we kept very still of course, and were satisfied with the *idea* of Paris. I could have borne to live on there, it was all so strange and full of contrast. . . .

“ Now you will write—I feel my way on the paper to write this. Nothing is changed between us, nothing can ever interfere with sacred confidences, remember. I do not show letters, you need not fear my turning traitress. . . . Pray for me, dearest friend, that the bitterness of old affections may not be too bitter with me, and that God may turn those salt waters sweet again.

“ Pray for your grateful and loving

“ E. B. B.”

They rested for a day or two at Avignon, and I must quote from the “Life of Mrs. Jameson,” written long afterwards by the niece who was with her on this momentous journey, a few lines that have become classical in their tender freshness—

"While there (at Avignon) we made a little expedition, a poetical pilgrimage, to Vaucluse. There, at the very source of the '*chiare, fresche e dolci acque*,' Mr. Browning took his wife up in his arms, and, carrying her across through the shallow curling waters, seated her on a rock that rose throne-like in the middle of the stream. Thus love and poetry took a new possession of the spot immortalized by Petrarch's loving fancy."

From Marseilles they went by sea to Genoa, and after a short rest there, at last reached their journey's end at Pisa.

She had of course had news by this time from Wimpole Street. The deep, unrelenting anger of her father had been a dreary certainty from the first; but it was an unexpected blow to find that her brothers, too, misunderstood and condemned what she had done. Partly no doubt they were hurt that she had not confided in them; though she made it clear that this had been solely due to her consideration for them. Partly, too, they were influenced by the prevailing idea that her health made it madness for her to dream of marrying. The customs of the family had grown round the sick-room at the top of the house, like grass round a stone, and it was hard for them to realize at first that their sister's hopeless ill-health had been largely an assumption of their own. Their resentment was not so deeply rooted as to last long, and in the end they were completely reconciled with her and her husband. But while it lasted, the disappointment to Mrs. Browning was very great, as will be seen.

Her sisters were absolutely loyal to her throughout,

and all her friends wrote with eager sympathy. Of her father it is not necessary to say much. He never openly expressed his anger or defended his reasons for it. All he would say when Mr. Kenyon tried to intercede was that "she ought to have been thinking of the next world." He simply cast her off, and refused to speak or hear of her again. She wrote to him many times, and he kept her letters till he happened to learn her address,—he would not ask it,—and then returned them all to her without a word, unopened. His daughter Henrietta and one of his sons were also married during his lifetime, and their fate was the same. It is impossible to characterize such action ; it is useless to try to explain it, because he was a man cast in an altogether abnormal mould ; and to condemn it is equally futile, because it had its roots too far down in his character to be isolated for blame. But though he never let a word fall on the subject, it is easy to believe that he must have suffered his punishment. If he could feel anything, he must have felt the steady alienation of his children, the grim want of confidence and sympathy in which his remaining years were spent.

I shall now quote in full a long letter which Mrs. Browning wrote during the first days at Pisa to her old friend Mrs. Martin, although it to some extent covers the same ground as the letter to Miss Mitford, already given. But this subsequent account of the great crisis she had passed through is far too interesting to be curtailed ; it would surely be impossible to conceive a more touching or more dignified *apologia* for the action she had taken.

"MY DEAREST MRS. MARTIN,—

"Will you believe that I began a letter to you before I took this step, to give you the whole story of the impulses towards it, feeling strongly that I owed what I considered my justification to such dear friends as yourself and Mr. Martin, that you might not hastily conclude that you had thrown away upon one who was quite unworthy the regard of years? I had begun such a letter—when, by the plan of going to Little Bookham, my plans were all hurried forward—changed—driven prematurely into action, and the last hours of agitation and deep anguish—for it was the deepest of its kind, to leave Wimpole Street and those whom I tenderly loved—*so* would not admit of my writing or thinking: only I was able to think that my beloved sisters would send you some account of me when I was gone. And now I hear from them that your generosity has not waited for a letter from me to do its best for me, and that instead of being vexed, as you might well be, at my leaving England without a word sent to you, you have used kind offices in my behalf, you have been more than the generous and affectionate friend I always considered you. So my first words must be that I am deeply grateful to you, my very dear friend, and that to the last moment of my life I shall remember the claim you have on my gratitude. Generous people are inclined to acquit generously; but it has been very painful to me to observe that with all my mere friends I have found more sympathy and *trust*, than in those who are of my own household and who have been daily witnesses of my life. I do not say this for papa,

who is peculiar and in a peculiar position ; but it pained me that ——, who *knew* all that passed last year—for instance, about Pisa—who knew that the alternative of making a single effort to secure my health during the winter was the severe displeasure I have incurred now, and that the fruit of yielding myself a prisoner was the sense of being of no use nor comfort to any soul, papa having given up coming to see me except for five minutes a day ; ——, who said to me with his own lips, ‘ He does not love you—do not think it ’ (said and repeated it two months ago)—that —— should now turn round and reproach me for want of affection towards my family, for not letting myself drop like a dead weight into the abyss, a sacrifice without an object and expiation—this did surprise me and pain me—pained me more than all papa’s dreadful words. But the personal feeling is nearer with most of us than the tenderest feeling for another ; and my family had been so accustomed to the idea of my living on and on in that room, that while my heart was eating itself, their love for me was consoled, and at last the evil grew scarcely perceptible. It was no want of love in them, and quite natural in itself : we all get used to the thought of a tomb ; and I was buried, that was the whole. It was a little thing even for myself a short time ago, and really it would be a pneumatological curiosity if I could describe and let you see how perfectly for years together, after what broke my heart at Torquay, I lived on the outside of my own life, blindly and darkly from day to day, as completely dead to hope of any kind as if I had my face against a grave, never feeling a personal instinct, taking trains of thought to carry out as an

occupation absolutely indifferent to the *me* which is in every human being. Nobody quite understood this of me, because I am not morally a coward, and have a hatred of all the forms of audible groaning. But God knows what is within, and how utterly I had abdicated myself and thought it not worth while to put out my finger to touch my share of life. Even my poetry, which suddenly grew an interest, was the thing on the outside of me, a thing to be done, and then done! What people said of it did not touch *me*. A thoroughly morbid and desolate state it was, which I look back now to with the sort of horror with which one would look to one's graveclothes, if one had been clothed in them by mistake during a trance.

“And now I will tell you. It is nearly two years ago since I have known Mr. Browning. Mr. Kenyon wished to bring him to see me five years ago, as one of the lions of London who roared the gentlest and was best worth my knowing; but I refused then, in my blind dislike to seeing strangers. Immediately, however, after the publication of my last volumes, he wrote to me, and we had a correspondence which ended in my agreeing to receive him as I never had received any other man. I did not know why, but it was utterly impossible for me to refuse to receive him, though I consented against my will. He writes the most exquisite letters possible, and has a way of putting things which I have not, a way of putting aside—so he came. He came, and with our personal acquaintance began his attachment for me, a sort of *infatuation* call it, which resisted the various denials which were my plain duty at the beginning, and has persisted

past them all. I began with a grave assurance that I was in an exceptional position and saw him just in consequence of it, and that if ever he recurred to that subject again I never could see him again while I lived ; and he believed me and was silent. To my mind, indeed, it was a bare impulse—a generous man of quick sympathies taking up a sudden interest with both hands ! So I thought ; but in the mean time the letters and the visits rained down more and more, and in every one there was something which was too slight to analyze and notice, but too decided not to be understood ; so that at last, when the ‘proposed respect’ of the silence gave way, it was rather less dangerous. So then I showed him how he was throwing into the ashes his best affections—how the common gifts of youth and cheerfulness were behind me—how I had not strength, even of *heart*, for the ordinary duties of life—everything I told him and showed him. ‘Look at this—and this—and this,’ throwing down all my disadvantages. To which he did not answer by a single compliment, but simply that he had not then to choose, and that I might be right or he might be right, he was not there to decide ; but that he loved me and should to his last hour. He said that the freshness of youth had passed with him also, and that he had studied the world out of books and seen many women, yet had never loved one until he had seen me. That he knew himself, and knew that, if ever so repulsed, he should love me to his last hour—it should be first and last. At the same time, he would not tease me, he would wait twenty years if I pleased, and then, if life lasted so long for both of us, then when it was ending perhaps, I might understand him

and feel that I might have trusted him. For my health he had believed when he first spoke that I was suffering from an incurable injury of the spine, and that he never could hope to see me stand up before his face, and he appealed to my womanly sense of what a pure attachment should be—whether such a circumstance, if it had been true, was inconsistent with it. He preferred, he said, of free and deliberate choice, to be allowed to sit only an hour a day by my side, to the fulfilment of the brightest dream which should exclude me, in any possible world.

“I tell you so much, my ever dear friend, that you may see the manner of man I have had to do with, and the sort of attachment which for nearly two years has been drawing and winning me. I know better than any in the world, indeed, what Mr. Kenyon once unconsciously said before me—that ‘Robert Browning is great in everything.’ Then, when you think how this element of an affection so pure and persistent, cast into my dreary life, must have acted on it—how little by little I was drawn into the persuasion that something was left, and that still I could do something to the happiness of another—and he what he was, for I have deprived myself of the privilege of praising him—then it seemed worth while to take up with that unusual energy (for me!), expended in vain last year, the advice of the physicians that I should go to a warm climate for the winter. Then came the Pisa conflict of last year. For years I had looked with a sort of indifferent expectation towards Italy, knowing and feeling that I should escape there the annual relapse, yet, with that *laisser aller* manner which had become a habit to me, unable to form a definite wish about it. But last year, when all this happened to

me, and I was better than usual in the summer, I wished to make the experiment—to live the experiment out, and see whether there was hope for me or not hope. Then came Dr. Chambers, with his encouraging opinion. ‘I wanted simply a warm climate and *air*,’ he said ; ‘I might be well if I pleased.’ Followed what you know—or do not precisely know—the pain of it was acutely felt by me ; for I never had doubted but that papa would catch at any human chance of restoring my health. I was under the delusion always that the difficulty of making such trials lay in *me*, and not in *him*. His manner of acting towards me last summer was one of the most painful griefs of my life, because it involved a disappointment in the affections. My dear father is a very peculiar person. He is naturally stern, and has exaggerated notions of authority, but these things go with high and noble qualities ; and as for feeling, the water is under the rock, and I had faith. Yes, and have it. I admire such qualities as he has—fortitude, integrity. I loved him for his courage in adverse circumstances which were yet felt by him more literally than I could feel them. Always he has had the greatest power over my heart, because I am of those weak women who reverence strong men. By a word he might have bound me to him hand and foot. Never has he spoken a gentle word to me or looked a kind look which has not made in me large results of gratitude, and throughout my illness the sound of his step on the stairs has had the power of quickening my pulse—I have loved him so and love him. Now, if he had said last summer that he was reluctant for me to leave him—if he had even allowed me to think *by mistake* that his affection for me was the motive of such

reluctance—I was ready to give up Pisa in a moment, and I told him as much. Whatever my new impulses towards life were, my love for him (taken so) would have resisted all—I loved him so dearly. But his course was otherwise, quite otherwise, and I was wounded to the bottom of my heart—cast off when I was ready to cling to him. In the meanwhile, at my side was another; I was driven and I was drawn. Then at last I said, ‘If you like to let this winter decide it, you may. I will allow of no promises nor engagement. I cannot go to Italy, and I know, as nearly as a human creature can know any fact, that I shall be ill again through the influence of this English winter. If I am, you will see plainer the foolishness of this persistence; if I am not, I will do what you please.’ And his answer was, ‘If you are ill and keep your resolution of not marrying me under those circumstances, I will keep mine and love you till God shall take us both.’ This was in last autumn, and the winter came with its miraculous mildness, as you know, and I was saved as I dared not hope; my word therefore was claimed in the spring. Now do you understand, and will you feel for me? An application to my father was certainly the obvious course, if it had not been for his peculiar nature and my peculiar position. But there is no speculation in the case; it is a matter of knowledge that if Robert had applied to him in the first instance he would have been forbidden the house without a moment’s scruple; and if in the last (as my sisters thought best as a respectable *form*), I should have been incapacitated from any after-exertion by the horrible scenes to which, as a thing of course, I should have been exposed. Papa will not bear some subjects, it is a thing *known*; his peculiarity

takes that ground to the largest. Not one of his children will ever marry without a breach, which we all know, though he probably does not—deceiving himself in a setting up of *obstacles*, whereas the real obstacle is in his own mind. In my case there was, or would have been, a great deal of apparent reason to hold by; my health would have been motive enough—ostensible motive. I see that precisely as others may see it. Indeed, if I were charged now with want of generosity for casting myself so, a dead burden, on the man I love, nothing of the sort could surprise me. It was what occurred to myself, that thought was, and what occasioned a long struggle and months of agitation, and which nothing could have overcome but the very uncommon affection of a very uncommon person, reasoning out to me the great fact of love making its own level. As to vanity and selfishness blinding me, certainly I may have made a mistake, and the future may prove it, but still more certainly I was not blinded *so*. On the contrary, never have I been more humbled, and never less in danger of considering any personal pitiful advantage, than throughout this affair. You, who are generous and a woman, will believe this of me, even if you do not comprehend the *habit* I had fallen into of casting aside the consideration of possible happiness of my own. But I was speaking of papa. Obvious it was that the application to him was a mere form. I knew the result of it. I had made up my mind to act upon my full right of taking my own way. I had long believed such an act (the most strictly personal act of one's life) to be within the rights of every person of mature age, man or woman, and I had resolved to exercise that right in my own case by a

resolution which had slowly ripened. All the other doors of life were shut to me, and shut me in as in a prison, and only before this door stood one whom I loved best and who loved me best, and who invited me out through it for the good's sake which he thought I could do him. Now, if for the sake of the mere form I had applied to my father, and if, as he would have done directly, he had set up his 'curse' against the step I proposed to take, would it have been doing otherwise than placing a knife in his hand? A few years ago, merely through the reverberation of what he said to another on a subject like this, I fell on the floor in a fainting fit, and was almost delirious afterwards. I cannot bear some words. I would much rather have blows without them. In my actual state of nerves and physical weakness, it would have been the sacrifice of my whole life—of my convictions, of my affections, and, above all, of what the person dearest to me persisted in calling *his* life, and the good of it—if I had observed that 'form.' Therefore, wrong or right, I determined not to observe it, and, wrong or right, I did and do consider that in not doing so I sinned against no duty. That I was *constrained* to act clandestinely, and did not *choose* to do so, God is witness, and will set it down as my heavy misfortune and not my fault. Also, up to the very last act we stood in the light of day for the whole world, if it pleased, to judge us. I never saw him out of the Wimpole Street house; he came twice a week to see me—or rather, three times in the fortnight, openly in the sight of all, and this for nearly two years, and neither more nor less. Some jests used to be passed upon us by my brothers, and I allowed them without a word, but it would have been infamous in me to

have taken any into my confidence who would have suffered, as a direct consequence, a blighting of his own prospects. My secrecy towards them all was my simple duty towards them all, and what they call want of affection was an affectionate consideration for them. My sisters did indeed know the truth to a certain point. They knew of the attachment and engagement—I could not help that—but the whole of the event I kept from them with a strength and resolution which really I did not know to be in me, and of which nothing but a sense of the injury to be done to them by a fuller confidence, and my tender gratitude and attachment to them for all their love and goodness, could have rendered me capable. Their faith in me, and undeviating affection for me, I shall be grateful for to the end of my existence, and to the extent of my power of feeling gratitude. My dearest sisters!—especially, let me say, my own beloved Arabel, who, with no consolation except the exercise of a most generous tenderness, has looked only to what she considered my good—never doubting me, never swerving for one instant in her love for me. May God reward her as I cannot. Dearest Henrietta loves me too, but loses less in me, and has reasons for not misjudging me. But both my sisters have been faultless in their bearing towards me, and never did I love them so tenderly as I love them now.

“The only time I met R. B. clandestinely was in the parish church, where we were married before two witnesses—it was the first and only time. I looked, he says, more dead than alive, and can well believe it, for I all but fainted on the way, and had to stop for sal volatile at a chemist’s shop. The support through it all was *my trust*

in him, for no woman who ever committed a like act of trust has had stronger motives to hold by. Now may I not tell you that his genius, and all but miraculous attainments, are the least things in him, the moral nature being of the very noblest, as all who ever knew him admit? Then he has had that wide experience of men which ends by throwing the mind back on itself and God; there is nothing incomplete in him, except as all humanity is incompleteness. The only wonder is how such a man, whom any woman could have loved, should have loved me; but men of genius, you know, are apt to love with their imagination. Then there is something in the sympathy, the strange, straight sympathy which unites us on all subjects. If it were not that I look up to him, we should be too alike to be together perhaps, but I know my place better than he does, who is too humble. Oh, you cannot think how well we get on after six weeks of marriage! If I suffer again it will not be through him. Some day, dearest Mrs. Martin, I will show you and dear Mr. Martin how his *prophecy was fulfilled*, saving some picturesque particulars. I did not know before that Saul was among the prophets.

"My poor husband suffered very much from the constraint imposed on him by my position, and did, for the first time in his life, for my sake do that in secret which he could not speak upon the housetops. *Mea culpa* all of it! If one of us two is to be blamed, it is I, at whose representation of circumstances he submitted to do violence to his own self-respect. I would not suffer him to tell even our dear common friend Mr. Kenyon. I felt that it would be throwing on dear Mr. Kenyon a painful

responsibility, and involve him in the blame ready to fall. And dear dear Mr. Kenyon, like the noble, generous friend I love so deservedly, comprehends all at a word, sends us *not* his forgiveness, but his sympathy, his affection, the kindest words which can be written ! I cannot tell you all his inexpressible kindness to us both. He justifies us to the uttermost, and, in that, all the grateful attachment we had, each on our side, so long professed towards him. Indeed, in a note I had from him yesterday, he uses this strong expression after gladly speaking of our successful journey : ‘I considered that you had *perilled your life* upon this undertaking, and, reflecting upon your last position, I thought that *you had done well.*’ But my life was not perilled in the journey. The agitation and fatigue were evils, to be sure, and Mrs. Jameson, who met us in Paris by a happy accident, thought me ‘looking horribly ill’ at first, and persuaded us to rest there for a week on the promise of accompanying us herself to Pisa to help Robert to take care of me. He, who was in a fit of terror about me, agreed at once, and so she came with us, she and her young niece, and her kindness leaves us both very grateful. So kind she was, and is—for still she is in Pisa—opening her arms to us, and calling us ‘children of light’ instead of ugly names, and declaring that she should have been ‘proud’ to have had anything to do with our marriage. Indeed, we hear every day kind speeches and messages from people such as Mr. Chorley of the *Athenæum*, who ‘has tears in his eyes,’ Monckton Milnes, Barry Cornwall, and other friends of my husband’s, but who only know *me* by my books, and I want the love and sympathy of those who love me and whom I love. I was talking of the influence

of the journey. The change of air has done me wonderful good notwithstanding the fatigue, and I am renewed to the point of being able to throw off most of my invalid habits, and of walking quite like a woman. Mrs. Jameson said the other day, ‘You are not *improved*, you are *transformed*.’ We have most comfortable rooms here at Pisa, and have taken them for six months, in the best situation for health, and close to the Duomo and Leaning Tower. It is a beautiful, solemn city, and we have made acquaintance with Professor Ferucci, who is about to admit us to [a sight] of the [University Lib]rary. We shall certainly [spend] next summer in Italy *somewhere*, and [talk] of Rome for the next winter, but, of course, this is all in air. Let me hear from you, dearest Mrs. Martin, and direct, ‘M. Browning, Poste Restante, Pisa’—it is best. Just before we left Paris I wrote to my aunt Jane, and from Marseilles to Bummy, but from neither have I heard yet.

“With best love to dearest Mr. Martin, ever both my dear kind friends,

“Your affectionate and grateful

“BA.”

From another long letter to Mrs. Martin, written only a few days later, it will be enough to give some extracts—

“I thank you once more, my dear kind friends, I thank you both—I never shall forget your goodness. I feel it, of course, the more deeply, in proportion to the painful disappointment in other quarters. . . . Am I bitter? The feeling, however, passes while I write it out, and my own affection for everybody will wait patiently to be ‘forgiven’

in the proper form, when everybody shall be at leisure properly. Assuredly, in the meanwhile, however, my case is not to be classed with other cases—what happened to me could not have happened, perhaps, with any other family in England . . . I hate and loathe everything too which is clandestine—we *both* do, Robert and I ; and the manner the whole business was carried on in might have instructed the least acute of the bystanders. The flowers standing perpetually on my table for the last two years were brought there by one hand, as everybody knew ; and really it would have argued an excess of benevolence in an unmarried man with quite enough resources in London, to pay the continued visits he paid to me without some strong motive indeed. Was it his fault that he did not associate with everybody in the house as well as with me ? He desired it ; but no—that was not to be. The endurance of the pain of the position was not the least proof of his attachment to me. How I thank you for believing in him—how grateful it makes me ! He will justify to the uttermost that faith. We have been married two months, and every hour has bound me to him more and more ; if the beginning was well, still better it is now—that is what he says to me, and I say back again day by day. Then it is an ‘advantage’ to have an inexhaustible companion who talks wisdom of all things in heaven and earth, and shows besides as perpetual a good humour and gaiety as if he were—a fool, shall I say ? or a considerable quantity more, perhaps. As to our domestic affairs, it is not to *my* honour and glory that the ‘bills’ are made up every week and paid more regularly ‘than hard beseems,’ while dear Mrs. Jameson laughs outright at our miraculous prudence and

economy, and declares that it is past belief and precedent that we should not burn the candles at both ends, and the next moment will have it that we remind her of the children in a poem of Heine's who set up housekeeping in a tub, and inquired gravely the price of coffee. Ah, but she has left Pisa at last—left it yesterday. It was a painful parting to everybody. Seven weeks spent in such close neighbourhood—a month of it under the same roof and in the same carriages—will fasten people together, and then travelling *shakes* them together. A more affectionate, generous woman never lived than Mrs. Jameson, and it is pleasant to be sure that she loves us both from her heart, and not only *du bout des lèvres.*"

Of Pisa she says in the same letter—

"Oh, it is so beautiful and so full of repose, yet not *desolate*; it is rather the repose of sleep than of death. Then after the first ten days of rain, which seemed to refer us fatally to Alfieri's 'piove e ripiove,' came as perpetual a divine sunshine, such cloudless, exquisite weather that we ask whether it may not be June instead of November. Every day I am out walking, while the golden oranges look at me over the walls, and when I am tired Robert and I sit down on a stone to watch the lizards. We have been to your sea-shore, too, and seen your island, only he insists on it (Robert does) that it is not Corsica but Gorgona, and that Corsica is not in sight. *Beautiful* and blue the island was, however, in any case. It might have been Romero's instead of either. Also we have driven up to the foot of mountains, and seen them reflected down in the little pure

lake of Ascuno, and we have seen the pine woods, and met the camels laden with faggots all in a line. So now ask me again if I enjoy my liberty as you expect. My head goes round sometimes, that is all. I never was happy before in my life. Ah, but, of course, the painful thoughts recur ! There are some whom I love too tenderly to be easy under their displeasure, or even under their injustice. . . . We are not in the warm orthodox position by the Arno, because we heard with our ears one of the best physicians of the place advise against it. ‘Better,’ he said, ‘to have cool rooms to live in and warm walks to go out along.’ The rooms we have are rather over-cool perhaps ; we are obliged to have a little fire in the sitting-room, in the mornings and evenings that is ; but I do not fear for the winter, there is too much difference to my feelings between this November and any English November I ever knew. We have our dinner from the Trattoria at two o’clock, and can dine our favourite way on thrushes and chianti with a miraculous cheapness, and no trouble, no cook, no kitchen ; the prophet Elijah or the lilies of the field took as little thought for their dining, which exactly suits us. It is a continental fashion which we never cease commending. Then at six we have coffee, and rolls of milk, made of milk, I mean, and at nine our supper (call it supper, if you please) of roast chestnuts and grapes. So you see how primitive we are, and how I forget to praise the eggs at breakfast. The worst of Pisa is, or would be to some persons, that, socially speaking, it has its dullnesses ; it is not lively like Florence, not in that way. But we do not want society, we shun it rather. We like the Duomo and the Campo Santo instead. Then we know a little of

Professor Ferucci, who gives us access to the University Library, and we subscribe to a modern one, and we have plenty of writing to do of our own."

The Brownings lived at Pisa in the Collegio Ferdinando, a building of Vasari's, close to the cathedral. Their life, as the foregoing extracts show, was one of extraordinary simplicity; strolling by day through the quiet old city, with its walled gardens, its soft views, its sun-bathed bridges over the broad river; at nightfall sitting by the fireside in blissful seclusion. The sudden transference from the dull London room to this exquisite freedom in the radiant Italian air may well have seemed a perpetual miracle to Mrs. Browning. Perhaps it is too much to expect that in this first rapture she should be much affected by the associations of the many dead centuries that cried from every stone around her; but it does not seem that this side of her new home at any time appealed strongly to her. That Italy is the loadstone of Europeans is not merely due to the loveliness of its scenery, haunting and noble as it is, but to the fact that of all countries that favoured land is the most deeply impregnated with the sense of a brilliant and continuous past. This aspect was curiously lost on Mrs. Browning. She loved the obvious beauty round her—as who would not?—but the more secret influences of the soil, the spirit that makes the landscape of Italy unique among other lands,—all this streamed beyond her. In spite of her old enthusiasm for the life of Greece, hers was not the mind which by instinct haunts the recesses of the past. She could not look backwards with eyes that linger regretfully on the ghosts of vanished things, rebelling

against death. With the vehement ardour of fragile people, her dreams were of the future ; she pressed forward, inspired with thoughts of liberty and progress,—clasping a shadow, as we may feel at times, but seldom content to acquiesce, to drift unresistingly, to luxuriate in visions of by-gone beauty. This mood, which was lifelong with her, grew in intensity from the time when she took Italy for her home. The modern sentiment of most lovers of Italy—the sentiment which revels in the past and finds the present at best merely an inharmonious intrusion—was rarer in those days. The palace of art, to which every reader of hand-books now claims admittance, was less accessible then ; people came and went, echoing admiration of a few obvious names, but without any of the recondite enthusiasms which nowadays are open to all. Moreover, the whole country was smouldering with new ideas and aspirations, all ready to break into flame ; modern Italy had a power over the imagination—especially over the more optimistic, less sceptical imagination of those days—which she cannot exert now. It is true that there are now signs of a reaction against the view that makes Italy a mere museum of art, a storehouse of poetical sensations ; and to such rebellious souls Mrs. Browning's impassioned enthusiasm for Italian politics will appeal as a sign of grace. But this revolt against an established sentimentalism has at least as much of the spirit of contradiction as of reality. The future of Italy belongs to the Italians ; an Englishman can no more adopt a foreign country in this sense than he can change the homely features to which he was born. But the past of Italy belongs to all lands which have felt the reverberations of that gorgeous procession. An

Englishman in Italy stands upon soil that for century after century has bequeathed to him, among so many thousand others, his own share of its richness, and if he carries with him a single grain of golden dust, it may well be to Italy that he owes it.

Of all this Mrs. Browning was unconscious, and it is a disappointment to find that her Italian years lack that fine background of beauty which they might otherwise have had. But as yet, in these idyllic weeks at Pisa, the sunlight, the distant Carrara hills, the wine-coloured twilight over the crowded vineyards, the ghostly white towers against the thickening night,—these were setting enough for their quiet and solitary romance. In their sudden freedom from the old restraints and anxieties, the outer world withdrew itself out of sight and sound. Later on they were caught into a new life, into the stirring excitements which were beginning to fly from city to city of Italy; but in this peaceful interlude these voices did not yet break in on them.

On December 19, 1846, she writes to Miss Mitford—

“ Robert and I are deep in the fourth month of wedlock; there has not been a shadow between us, nor a *word* (and I have observed that all married people confess to *words*), and that the only change I can lay my finger on in him is simply and clearly an increase of affection. Now, I need not say it if I did not please, and I should not please, you know, to tell a story. The truth is, that I who always did certainly believe in love, yet was as great a sceptic as you about the evidences thereof, and having held twenty times that Jacob’s serving fourteen years for Rachel was not too

long by fourteen days, I was not a likely person (with my loathing dread of marriage as a loveless state, and absolute contentment with single life as the alternative to the great majorities of marriages), I was not likely to accept a feeling not genuine, though from the hand of Apollo himself, crowned with his various godships. Especially too, in my position, I could not, would not, should not have done it. Then, genuine feelings are genuine feelings, and do not pass like a cloud. We are as happy as people can be, I do believe, yet are living in a way to *try* this new relationship of ours—in the utmost seclusion and perpetual *tête-à-tête*—no amusement nor distraction from without, except some of the very dullest Italian romances which throw us back on the memory of Balzac with reiterated groans. The Italians seem to hang on translations from the French—as we find from the library—not merely of Balzac, but Dumas, your Dumas, and reaching lower—long past De Kock—to the third and fourth rate novelists. What is purely Italian is, as far as we have read, purely dull and conventional. There is no breath nor pulse in the Italian genius. Mrs. Jameson writes to us from Florence, that in politics and philosophy the people are getting alive—which may be, for aught we know to the contrary, the poetry and imagination leave them room enough by immense vacancies.

“ Yet we delight in Italy, and dream of ‘ pleasures new ’ for the summer—*pastures* new, I should have said—but it comes to the same thing. The *padrone* in this house sent us in as a gift (in gracious recognition, perhaps, of our lawful paying of bills) an immense dish of oranges—two hanging on a stalk with the green leaves still moist

with the morning's dew—every great orange of twelve or thirteen with its own stalk and leaves. Such a pretty sight! And better oranges, I beg to say, never were eaten, when we are barbarous enough to eat them day by day after our two-o'clock dinner, softening, with the vision of them, the winter which has just shown itself. Almost I have been as pleased with the oranges as I was at Avignon by the *pomegranate* given to me much in the same way. Think of my being singled out of all our caravan of travellers—Mrs. Jameson and Gerardine Jameson* both there—for that significant gift of the pomegranates! I had never seen one before, and, of course, proceeded instantly to cut one 'deep down the middle'†—accepting the omen. Yet, in shame and confusion of face, I confess to not being able to appreciate it properly. Olives and pomegranates I set on the same shelf, to be just looked at and called by their names, but by no means eaten bodily.

"But you mistake me, dearest friend, about the 'Blackwood' verses. I never thought of writing *applicative poems*—the heavens forfend! Only that just *then*, [in] the midst of all the talk, *any* verses of mine should come into print—and some of them to that *particular effect*—looked unlucky. I dare say poor papa (for instance) thought me turned suddenly to brass itself. Well, it is perhaps more my fancy than anything else, and was only an impression, even there. Mr. Chorley will tell you of a play of his, which I hope will make its way, though I do wonder how

* This surname is a mistake on Mrs. Browning's part; see page 190.

† See "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," stanza xli.

people can bear to write for the theatres in the present state of things. Robert is busy preparing a new edition of his collected poems, which are to be so clear that every one who has understood them hitherto will lose all distinction. We both mean to be as little idle as possible. . . . We shall meet one day in joy, I do hope, and then you will love my husband for his own sake, as for mine you do not hate him now.

“Your ever affectionate

“E. B. B.”

It was at Pisa, early in 1847, that she redeemed the promise made to Browning the summer before, and at last brought herself to show him what she had written, secretly and shyly, while her family were occupied downstairs and she was left alone with her thoughts. The “Sonnets from the Portuguese” were to be her present to her husband after they were married, but it was some months before she could make up her mind to let him hear how completely and profoundly she had given voice to her passion. The incident is described by Mr. Edmund Gosse, who was told it by Browning himself, and the often-quoted account cannot be omitted here. Mr. Gosse writes *—

“Their custom was, Mr. Browning said, to write alone, and not to show each other what they had written. This was a rule which he sometimes broke through, but she never. He had the habit of working in a downstairs room, where their meals were spread, while Mrs. Browning studied in a room on the floor above. One day, early in 1847, their

* “Critical Kit-Kats” (1896).

breakfast being over, Mrs. Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning,* who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it ; and then she fled again to her own room.”

Browning’s shock of delight at finding how her love for him had passed into her poetry can be imagined. He had the deepest admiration for her genius, unequal as her work had been hitherto ; and it must have been a keen personal pleasure as well to find that in reflecting his entry into her life, her poetry had touched a higher level of power and beauty than it had yet attained. That such was the case cannot be entirely referred to the purifying influences of the sonnet form. Of course that form was essentially one in which her most characteristic faults were impossible, because its rigidity necessarily checks diffuseness ; while the way in which it concentrates attention upon a small surface made it plain to her that looseness of texture and rhyme was a vital flaw, and not an agreeable licence, as in her lyrics she was too apt to think. But it is not only to such technical restrictions that these sonnets owe the nobility, the splendid colour, the stateliness of thought and phrase, which here appear fully in her work for the first time. Many of them are much below the rest

* Mlle. Merlette adds the just and charming comment, “Dont on reconnaît les manières de petite fille, en si grande contraste avec son génie et son savoir.” (“La vie et l’œuvre d’E. B. Browning,” 1905.)

in value ; in some there are expressions (like the terrible "antidotes of medicated music") which are like a cold sponge in the reader's face ; in a few (such as that beginning "First time he kissed me") the motive is too trivial to bear the weight laid on it. But, at their best, theme and language rise together to a passion that speaks out suddenly in her poetry, like a real voice after the tentative efforts, the half-literary emotions of her earlier work. When this new music, gathering and heightening through page after page, culminates in the splendid burst of rapture of the sonnet beginning, "How do I love thee ? Let me count the ways," and sinks to its exquisite close in the last, "Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers,"—then it is clear how deeply her genius has been enriched by the new brightness and glory of her life.

She could not bring herself at first to face the idea of publishing poems that were so essentially a part of herself. But Browning realized at once that they belonged to too high an order of poetry to be sacrificed to the desire, which he naturally shared, of keeping such intimate writing from other eyes. "I dared not reserve to myself," he said, "the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's." They were first entrusted to Miss Mitford, who superintended their issue in a small pamphlet, privately printed at Reading in 1847. Three years later they were published in the collected edition of Mrs. Browning's poems, and before then the quaint idea had occurred to her of veiling their intimacy under the fiction that they were translations from a foreign language. "Sonnets from the Bosnian," which was her suggestion, was too fantastic. "No, not Bosnian," said Browning, "that means nothing—but from the

Portuguese! They are Catarina's sonnets,"—that Catarina of whose love for Camoëns his wife had written, in the poem which of all her work he loved the best. As "Sonnets from the Portuguese" they accordingly appeared.

In April, 1847, the Brownings left Pisa; not that they were tired of the enchanted city, that lay in its silence and virginal beauty, like a sleeping princess in the middle of the glowing plain; but they were pledged to visit Florence while the true friend was there who had helped them in the first flight to Italy. They set out, therefore, in the spring, bequeathing tender memories to the place which already held remoter echoes of Byron and Shelley. At Florence they established themselves in the Via delle belle Donne, and from there Mrs. Browning writes, on April 24, to Mrs. Martin—

"I lie here flat on the sofa in order to be wise; I rest and take port wine by wine-glasses; and a few more days of it will prepare me, I hope and trust, for an interview with the Venus de' Medici. Think of my having been in Florence since Tuesday, this being Saturday, and not a step taken into the galleries. It seems a disgrace, a sort of involuntary disgraceful act, or rather no-act, which to complain of relieves one to some degree. And how kind of you to wish to hear from me of myself! There is nothing really much the matter with me; I am just *weak*, sleeping and eating dreadfully well considering that Florence isn't seen yet, and 'looking well,' too, says Mrs. Jameson, who, with her niece, is our guest just now. It would have been wise if I had rested longer at Pisa, but, you see, there was a long engagement to meet Mrs. Jameson

here, and she expressed a very kind unwillingness to leave Italy without keeping it : also she had resolved to come out of her way on purpose for this, and, as I had the consent of my physician, we determined to perform our part of the compact ; and in order to prepare for the longer journey I went out in the carriage a little too soon, perhaps, and a little too long. At least, if I had kept quite still I should have been strong by this time—not that I have done myself harm in the serious sense, observe—and now the affair is accomplished, I shall be wonderfully discreet and self-denying, and resist Venuses and Apollos like some one wiser than the gods themselves. My chest is very well ; there has been no symptom of evil in that quarter. . . . We took the whole coupé of the diligence—but regretted our first plan of the *vettura* nevertheless—and now are settled in very comfortable rooms in the ‘Via delle Belle Donne’ just out of the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, very superior rooms to our apartment in Pisa, in which we were cheated to the uttermost with all the subtlety of Italy and to the full extent of our ignorance ; think what *that* must have been ! Our present apartment, with the hire of a grand piano and music, does not cost us so much within ever so many francisconi. Oh, and you don’t frighten me, though we are on the north side of the Arno ! We have taken our rooms for two months, and may be here longer, and the fear of the heat was stronger with me than the fear of the cold, or we might have been in the Pitti and ‘arrostiti’ by this time. We expected dear Mrs. Jameson on Saturday, but she came on Friday evening, having suddenly remembered that it was Shakespeare’s birthday, and bringing with her from Arezzo a bottle of wine to ‘drink to his memory with

two other poets,' so there was a great deal of merriment, as you may fancy, and Robert played Shakespeare's favourite air, 'The Light of Love,' and everybody was delighted to meet everybody, and Roman news and Pisan dullness were properly discussed on every side. She saw a good deal of Cobden in Rome, and went with him to the Sistine Chapel. He has no feeling for art, and, being very true and earnest, could only do his best to *try* to admire Michael Angelo ; but here and there, where he understood, the pleasure was expressed with a blunt characteristic simplicity. Standing before the statue of Demosthenes, he said : 'That man is persuaded himself of what he speaks, and will therefore persuade others.' She liked him exceedingly. For my part, I should join in more admiration if it were not for his having *accepted money*, but paid patriots are no heroes of mine. 'Verily they have their reward.' "

Mrs. Jameson left them before long, and on May 12
Mrs. Browning writes to her—

"I have been out once, only once, and only for an inglorious glorious drive round the Piazza Gran Duca, past the Duomo, outside the walls, and in again at the Cascine. It was like the trail of a vision in the evening sun. I saw the Perseus in a sort of flash. The Duomo is more after the likeness of a Duomo than Pisa can show ; I like those masses in ecclesiastical architecture. Now we are plotting how to engage a carriage for a month's service without ruining ourselves, for we *must* see, and I *can't* walk and see, though much stronger than when we parted, and looking much better, as Robert and the looking glass both do testify. I have seemed at last 'to leap to a conclusion' of

convalescence. But the heat—oh, so hot it is. If it is half as hot with you, you must be calling on the name of St. Lawrence by this time, and require no ‘turning.’ I should not like to travel under such a sun. It would be too like playing at snapdragon. Yes, ‘brightly happy.’ Women generally *lose* by marriage, but I have gained the world by mine. If it were not for some griefs, which are and must be griefs, I should be too happy perhaps, which is good for nobody. May God bless you, my dear, dearest friend ! ”

Much as she had profited by the pure air and constant sunshine of the Italian winter, unusual exertion of any kind still told severely on Mrs. Browning, and the first weeks in Florence were chiefly spent in rest and seclusion. But she loved to be a sightseer, even though, as I have indicated, neither art nor history appealed to her very deeply ; and as soon as she was able she began to make the rounds of the Florentine buildings and galleries. And here, it must be confessed, the modern reader feels a drop ; he is conscious that Mrs. Browning, to put it plainly, is giving herself away when she talks of pictures and architecture. She conforms almost distressingly to her period. Her enthusiasm extends no further than what was then the prescribed field. We hear of Domenichino and Guercino, of the inevitably “divine” Raphael, and that, too, in the stereotyped language, without the bewildering freshness, the mark at any rate of individuality, that we expect when a man or woman of genius is confronted with strange sights and experiences. I do not imply that the masters I have named were not worth her admiration, but I do mean that

we might fairly look in a poet of her temper for some signs of independence and originality in her praise of them. In lesser people this submission has of course the quaintness, the suggestions of old fashions and modes of thought, that touches the imagination so readily. It is sweet to think how easy, how unsuspecting, were the artistic enthusiasms of those days, compared with the anxious exacting eyes which nowadays we turn away from the big bright pictures on well-lit walls, to the lumber-rooms, the obscure chapels, the smoke-begrimed altar-pieces of the “best period.” But from Mrs. Browning we want, not the fashions of her time, but herself ; and it is a disappointment to find that in the Uffizi and the Pitti she sits with her contemporaries and echoes their comments instead of producing some new mintage of praise and blame. It is the only region of the mind in which she was somewhat conventional.

The following extract is from one of the last letters to Mr. Boyd (he died a year later) :—

“ In the meanwhile I have seen the Venus, I have seen the divine Raphaels. I have stood by Michael Angelo’s tomb in Santa Croce. I have looked at the wonderful Duomo. This cathedral ! After all, the elaborate grace of the Pisan cathedral is one thing, and the massive grandeur of this of Florence is another and better thing ; it struck me with a sense of the sublime in architecture. At Pisa we say, ‘ How beautiful ! ’ here we say nothing ; it is enough if we can breathe. The mountainous marble masses overcome as we look up—we feel the weight of them on the soul. Tesselated marbles (the green treading its elaborate pattern into the dim yellow, which seems the general hue

of the structure) climb against the sky, self-crowned with that prodigy of marble domes. It struck me as a wonder in architecture. I had neither seen nor imagined the like of it in any way. It seemed to carry its theology out with it ; it signified more than a mere building. Tell me everything you want to know. I shall like to answer a thousand questions. Florence is beautiful, as I have said before, and must say again and again, most beautiful. The river rushes through the midst of its palaces like a crystal arrow, and it is hard to tell, when you see all by the clear sunset, whether those churches, and houses, and windows, and bridges, and people walking, in the water or out of the water, are the real walls, and windows, and bridges, and people, and churches."

To avoid the summer heats at Florence they planned a retreat to Vallombrosa, the abortive result of which is told with much spirit in the following letter of August 7 :—

"And now I am going to tell you of Vallombrosa. You heard how we meant to stay two months there, and you are to imagine how we got up at three in the morning to escape the heat (imagine me !)—and with all our possessions and a 'dozen of port' (which my husband doses me with twice a day because once it was necessary) proceeded to Pelago by vettura, and from thence in two sledges, drawn each by two white bullocks up to the top of the holy mountain. (Robert was on horseback.) Precisely it must be as you left it. Who can make a road up a house ? We were four hours going five miles, and I with all my goodwill was dreadfully tired, and scarcely in appetite for the beef and oil with which we were

entertained at the House of Strangers. We are simple people about diet, and had said over and over that we would live on eggs and milk and bread and butter during these two months. We might as well have said that we would live on manna from heaven. The things we had fixed on were just the impossible things. Oh, that bread, with the fetid smell, which stuck in the throat like Macbeth's amen ! I am not surprised you recollect it ! The hens had 'got them to a nunnery,' and objected to lay eggs, and the milk and the holy water stood confounded. But of course we spread the tablecloth, just as you did, over all drawbacks of the sort ; and the beef and oil, as I said, and the wine too, were liberal and excellent, and we made our gratitude apparent in Robert's best Tuscan—in spite of which we were turned out ignominiously at the end of five days, having been permitted to overstay the usual three days by only two. No, nothing could move the lord abbot. He is a new abbot, and given to sanctity, and has set his face against women. 'While he is abbot,' he said to our mediating monk, 'he *will* be abbot.' So he is abbot, and we had to come back to Florence. As I read in the 'Life of San Gualberto,' laid on the table for the edification of strangers, the brothers attain to sanctification, among other means, by cleaning out pigsties with their bare hands, without spade or shovel ; but *that* is uncleanness enough—they wouldn't touch the little finger of a woman. Angry I was, I do assure you. I should have liked to stay there, in spite of the bread. We should have been only a little thinner at the end. And the scenery—oh, how magnificent ! How we enjoyed that great, silent, ink-black pine wood ! And do you remember the sea of

mountains to the left? How grand it is! We were up at three in the morning again to return to Florence, and the glory of that morning sun breaking the clouds to pieces among the hills is something ineffaceable from my remembrance. We came back ignominiously to our old rooms; but found it impossible to stay on account of the suffocating heat, yet we scarcely could go far from Florence, because of Mr. Kenyon and our hope of seeing him here (since lost). A perplexity ended by Robert's discovery of our present apartments, on the Pitti side of the river (indeed, close to the Grand Duke's palace), consisting of a suite of spacious and delightful rooms, which come within our means only from the deadness of the summer season, comparatively quite cool, and with a terrace which I enjoy to the uttermost through being able to walk there without a bonnet, by just stepping out of the window. The church of San Felice is opposite, so we haven't a neighbour to look through the sunlight or moonlight and take observations. Isn't that pleasant altogether? We ordered back the piano and the book subscription, and settled for two months, and forgave the Vallombrosa monks for the wrong they did us, like secular Christians. What is to come after, I can't tell you. But probably we shall creep slowly along toward Rome, and spend some hot time of it at Perugia, which is said to be cool enough."

As we have just read, the summer heat had driven the Brownings from the Via delle belle Donne, and they now installed themselves in a furnished apartment of the Palazzo Guidi, the house which under the homelier name of Casa Guidi afterwards became their home. But

as yet they did not settle themselves there permanently. Their plan, indeed, was to move further south for the winter, and in the extract next to be given, Mrs. Browning writes on October 1 of leaving Florence in another month. As a matter of fact, they found Florence impossible to desert, and stayed on there for the whole winter.

They now began to see something of the floating society of English and Americans round them, though still so little as hardly to interrupt their blissful privacy. The difficulty of getting new books was a trouble to so inveterate a novel-reader as Mrs. Browning, and she often laments the delays they have to suffer before the new Balzacs and Georges Sands reach them. Some passages from the letters of this winter will give a picture of their life. The first is to Miss Mitford on October 1.

"Very few acquaintances have we made at Florence, and very quietly lived out our days. Mr. Powers the sculptor is our chief friend and favourite, a most charming, simple, straightforward, genial American, as simple as the man of genius he has proved himself needs be. He sometimes comes to talk and take coffee with us, and we like him much. His wife is an amiable woman, and they have heaps of children from thirteen downwards, all, except the eldest boy, Florentines, and the sculptor has eyes like a wild Indian's, so black and full of light. You would scarcely wonder if they clave the marble without the help of his hands. We have seen besides the Hoppners, Lord Byron's friends at Venice, you will remember. And Miss Boyle, the niece of the Earl of Cork, and authoress and poetess on her own account, having been introduced once to Robert

in London at Lady Morgan's, has hunted us out and paid us a visit. A very vivacious little person, with sparkling talk enough. Lord Holland has lent her mother and herself the famous Careggi Villa, where Lorenzo the Magnificent died, and they have been living there among the vines these four months. These and a few American visitors are all we have seen at Florence. We live a far more solitary life than you do, in your village and with the 'prestige' of the country wrapping you round."

And again to Miss Mitford on December 8—

"Think what we have done since I wrote last to you. Taken two houses, that is, two apartments, each for six months, presigning the contract. You will set it down as excellent poet's work in the way of domestic economy; but the fault was altogether mine as usual, and my husband, to please me, took rooms which I could not be pleased by three days, through the absence of sunshine and warmth. The consequence was that we had to pay heaps of guineas away for leave to go away ourselves, any alternative being preferable to a return of illness, and I am sure I should have been ill if we had persisted in staying there. You can scarcely fancy the wonderful difference which the sun makes in Italy. Oh, he isn't a mere 'round O' in the air in this Italy, I assure you! He makes us feel that he rules the day to all intents and purposes. So away we came into the blaze of him here in the Piazza Pitti, precisely opposite the Grand Duke's palace, I with my remorse, and poor Robert without a single reproach. Any other man, a little lower than the angels, would have stamped and sworn a little for the mere relief of the thing, but as to *his* being

angry with *me* for any cause, except not eating enough dinner, the said sun would turn the wrong way first. So here we are on the Pitti till April, in small rooms yellow with sunshine from morning to evening ; and most days I am able to get out into the piazza, and walk up and down for some twenty minutes without feeling a shadow of breath from the actual winter. Also it is pleasant to be close to the Raffaels, to say nothing of the immense advantage of the festa days, when, day after day, the civic guard comes to show the whole population of Florence, their Grand Duke inclusive, the new helmets and epaulettes and the glory thereof. They have swords, too, I believe, somewhere. The crowds come and come, like children to see rows of dolls, only the children would tire sooner than the Tuscans. Robert said musingly the other morning, as we stood at the window, ‘ Surely, after all this, they would *use* those muskets.’ It’s a problem, a ‘ grand peut-être.’ I was rather amused by hearing lately that our civic heroes had the gallantry to propose to the ancient military that these last should do the night work, *i.e.* when nobody was looking on and there was no credit, as they found it dull and fatiguing. Ah, one laughs, you see ; one can’t help it now and then. But at the real and rising feeling of the people by night and day one doesn’t laugh indeed. I hear and see with the deepest sympathy of soul, on the contrary. I love the Italians, too, and none the less that something of the triviality and innocent vanity of children abounds in them.”

In December, then, they left the Palazzo Guidi, and moved for the winter into small sunny rooms, in the Piazza Pitti close by.

The following is from a letter to Mrs. Jameson of the same month :—

“ For my own part, you know I need not say a word if it were not true, and I must say to you, who saw the beginning with us, that this end of fifteen months is just fifteen times better and brighter ; the mystical ‘ moon ’ growing larger and larger till scarcely room is left for any stars at all : the only differences which have touched me being the more and more happiness. It would have been worse than unreasonable if in marrying I had expected one quarter of such happiness, and indeed I did not, to do myself justice, and every now and then I look round in astonishment and thankfulness together, yet with a sort of horror, seeing that this is not heaven after all. We live just as we did when you knew us, just as shut-up a life. Robert never goes anywhere except to take a walk with Flush, which isn’t my fault, as you may imagine : he has not been out one evening of the fifteen months ; but what with music and books and writing and talking, we scarcely know how the days go, it’s such a gallop on the grass. We are going through some of old Sacchetti’s novelets now ; characteristic work for Florence, if somewhat dull elsewhere. Boccaccios can’t be expected to spring up with the vines in rows, even in this climate. We got a newly printed addition to Savonarola’s poems the other day, very flat and cold, they did not catch fire when he was burnt. The most poetic thing in the book is his face on the first page, with that eager, devouring soul in the eyes of it.”

The following is from a letter to Mr. Kenyon, dated May 1, 1848, and contains a new note,—the note of

politics, in which, during the preceding months, Mrs. Browning's interest had been becoming more and more engaged :—

“ Do you know how I love France and the French ? Robert laughs at me for the mania of it, or used to laugh long before this revolution. When I was a prisoner, my other mania for imaginative literature used to be ministered to through the prison bars by Balzac, George Sand, and the like immortal improprieties. They kept the colour in my life to some degree and did good service in their time to me, I can assure you, though in dear discreet England women oughtn't to confess to such reading, I believe, or you told me so yourself one day. Well, but through reading the books I grew to love France, in a mania too ; and the interest, which all must feel in the late occurrences there, has been with me, and is, quite painful. I read the newspapers as I never did in my life, and hope and fear in paroxysms, yes, and am guilty of thinking far more of Paris than of Lombardy itself, and try to understand financial difficulties and social theories with the best will in the world ; much as Flush tries to understand me when I tell him that barking and jumping may be unseasonable things. Both of us open our eyes a good deal, but the comprehension is questionable after all. What, however, I do seem least of all to comprehend, is your hymn of triumph in England, just because you have a lower ideal of liberty than the French people have. See if in Louis Philippe's time France was not in many respects more advanced than England is now, property better divided, hereditary privilege abolished ! Are we to blow with the

trumpet because we respect the ruts while everywhere else they are mending the roads? I do not comprehend. As to the Chartists, it is only a pity in my mind that you have not more of them. That's their fault. Mine, you will say, is being pert about politics when you would rather have anything else in a letter from Italy. You have heard of my illness, and will have been sorry for me, I am certain; but with blessings edging me round, I need not catch at a thistle in the hedge to make a 'sorrowful complaint' of. Our plans have floated round and round, in and out of all the bays and creeks of the Happy Islands. . . ."

The tempestuous politics of 1848 and the succeeding years are here of interest only so far as they affected Mrs. Browning, and it is not necessary to do more than glance at them hastily. The real question is not whether she was right in the views she took, whether she correctly estimated the confused forces which were acting and reacting over France and Italy, but how and why they fastened upon her mind with such insistence? Up to the time of her arrival in Florence, there is hardly a word to show that she took any interest in the making or unmaking of governments, or that she cared to read newspapers and political reviews. In Florence it was naturally different; there she found events moving at her very door, and the air thick with ideas of revolution and reform; yet even so it is strange that she should have taken such an eager part in it all, for she saw nothing of Florentine society, and seems to have had few, if any, Italian friends. As yet, however, as is shown by the last extract, it is chiefly in France that she was interested. The politics of Florence seemed to be on

a very small scale. The idea of a united Italy was not yet to the front ; and while in Piedmont Charles Albert was struggling against Austria, and from Rome the new Pope Pius IX. was spreading excitement by his reputation, afterwards lost so ignominiously, for liberal reform, in Tuscany the Grand Duke was dabbling in what seemed little things beside these far-reaching achievements. The establishment of a national guard a few months before, and the grant of a constitution in February, 1848, had been hailed by the Florentines with boundless enthusiasm ; the Duke was adored as the most enlightened of Liberals. But the bubbling excitement of the city, howling one thing one week and another the next, began to seem futile to the fiery spirit of Mrs. Browning as she watched it from her windows. By December, 1848, the popular enthusiasm for the Duke had waned ; people had swung round suddenly to the idea of a revolution, if only they could make up their minds to it. Mrs. Browning writes with some contempt—

“As to the ‘war,’ *that* is rather different, it is painful to feel ourselves growing gradually cooler and cooler on the subject of Italian patriotism, valour, and good sense ; but the process is inevitable. The child’s play between the Livornese and our Grand Duke provokes a thousand pleasantries. Every now and then a day is fixed for a revolution in Tuscany, but up to the present time a shower has come and put it off. Two Sundays ago Florence was to have been ‘sacked’ by Leghorn, when a drizzle came and saved us. You think this a bad joke of mine or an impotent sarcasm, perhaps ; whereas I merely speak historically. Brave men, good men, even sensible men

there are of course in the land, but they are not strong enough for the times or for masterdom."

Again in the same month—

"Meanwhile, the saddest thing is the impossibility (which I, for one, feel) to sympathize, to go along with, the *people* to whom and to whose cause all my natural sympathies yearn. The word 'Liberty' ceases to make me thrill, as at something great and unmistakable, as, for instance, the other great words 'Truth' and 'Justice' do. The salt has lost its savour, the meaning has escaped from the term; we know nothing of what people will *do* when they aspire to Liberty. The holiness of liberty is desecrated by the sign of the ass's hoof. Fixed principles, either of opinion or action, seem clearly gone out of the world. The principle of Destruction is in the place of the principle of Re-integration, or of Radical Reform, as we called it in England. I look all round and can sympathize nowhere. The rulers hold by rottenness, and the people leap into the abyss, and nobody knows why this is, or why that is."

It is curious to note the tone of decision and authority with which Mrs. Browning writes of politics. She does not appear either to copy the books she reads or to echo the people she hears talk on the subject. She writes without affectation as one who has had exceptional opportunities of watching the workings of the machine and of testing the thoughts of a people. The independent judgment which she had always used in literary matters she still uses in the perfectly new world of politics, and it is really bewildering to find that she seems as sure of her ground, as equal to

arguing her opinions, when she writes of Italian reforms, as she ever was in fighting Mr. Kenyon over her rhymes or Mr. Boyd over Ossian.

To go back to May, 1848, it was in that month that the Brownings made their final move, returning to the same Casa Guidi in which they had spent a few months of the preceding year. They now took an unfurnished apartment there; and these rooms, gradually decorated by Browning with *trouvailles* from many curiosity shops, became their home, in spite of many wanderings, until Mrs. Browning's death. She writes to Miss Mitford on May 28—

“ . . . And now I must tell you what we have done since I wrote last, little thinking of doing so. You see, our problem was to get to England as much in our summers as possible, the expense of the intermediate journeys making it difficult of solution. On examination of the whole case, it appeared manifest that we were throwing money into the Arno by our way of taking furnished rooms, while to take an apartment and furnish it would leave us a clear return of the *furniture* at the end of the first year in exchange for our outlay, and of all but a free residence afterwards, with the privilege of making it productive by under-letting at our good pleasure. For instance, rooms we paid four guineas a month for, we could have the whole year unfurnished at ten or twelve—the cheapness of the furniture being besides something quite fabulous, especially at the present crisis. Laying which facts together, and seeing besides the all but necessity for us to reside abroad the colder part of every year, we leapt on our feet to the obvious conclusion you

have before you, and though the temptation was too strong for us to adopt quite the cheapest ways of the cheap scheme, by the dense economy of preferring small rooms, etc.—though, in fact, we have really done it magnificently, and planted ourselves in the Guidi Palace, in the favourite suite of the last count (his arms are in scagliola on the floor of my bedroom); though we have six beautiful rooms and a kitchen, three of them quite palace rooms and opening on a terrace; and though such furniture as comes by slow degrees into them is antique and worthy of the place—we yet shall have saved money by the close of this year; while for next year, see! we shall let our apartment to go to England, drawing from it the product of '*furnished rooms.*' Now I tell you all this lest you hear dreadful rumours of our having forsaken our native land, venerable institutions and all—whereas we remember it so well (it's a dear land in many senses) that we have done this thing chiefly in order to make sure of being able to get back comfortably. My friends the Martins used to have a home in Normandy, and carry the key of it in their pocket, going there just every year at fishing time. A corner in Florence may pass for a still better thing, even without the terrace, and the orange trees and camelias we mean to throng it with. A stone's throw, too, it is from the Pitti; and really, in my present mind, I would scarcely exchange with the Grand Duke himself. Our rooms are delightful, and Flush agrees to praise them, all but the terrace, which he considers full of risks. There he will go only by himself or with me. To walk there three at a time may involve a pushing off into the street, of which he has a lively sense in his imagination. By-the-by,

as to street we have no spectators at windows—just the grey wall of a church, called San Felice for good omen. Now have you heard enough of us? What I claimed first, in way of privilege, was a spring sofa to loll upon, and a supply of rain-water to wash in; and you should see what a picturesque oil-jar they have given us for the latter purpose. It would just hold the captain of the forty thieves. As to the chairs and tables, I yield the more especial interest in them to Robert. Only, you would laugh to hear us correct one another sometimes. ‘Dear, you get too many drawers and not enough washing-stands. Pray don’t let us have any more drawers, when we’ve nothing more to put into them.’ There was no division on the necessity of having six spoons—some questions pass themselves.”

And to Mrs. Jameson on July 15—

“As to Italian society, one may as well take to longing for the evening star, for it seems quite as inaccessible; and indeed, of society of any sort we have not much, nor wish for it, nor miss it. Dearest friend, if I could open my heart to you in all seriousness, you would see nothing there but a sort of enduring wonder of happiness—yes, and some gratitude, I do hope, besides. Could everything be well in England, I should only have to melt out of the body at once in the joy and the glow of it. Happier and happier I have been, month after month; and when I hear him talk of being happy too, my very soul seems to swim round with feelings which cannot be spoken. But I tell you a little, because I owe the telling to you, and also that you may set down in your philosophy the possibility

of book-making creatures living happily together. I admit, though, to begin (or end), that my husband is an exceptional human being, and that it wouldn't be just to measure another by him."

As the summer went on they planned a retreat to some cooler place, and after an examination of guide-books found that "Murray, the traitor" recommended Fano, on the Adriatic coast, as a "delightful summer residence for an English family."

"We found it uninhabitable from the heat, vegetation scorched with paleness, the very air swooning in the sun, and the gloomy looks of the inhabitants sufficiently corroborative of their words, that no drop of rain or dew ever falls there during the summer. A 'circulating library' 'which doesn't give out books,' and 'a refined and intellectual Italian society' (I quote Murray for that phrase) which 'never reads a book through' (I quote Mrs. Wiseman, Dr. Wiseman's mother, who has lived in Fano seven years), complete the advantages of the place, yet the churches are beautiful, and a divine picture of Guercino's is worth going all that way to see. By a happy accident we fell in with Mrs. Wiseman, who, having married her daughter to Count Gabrielli with ancestral possessions in Fano, has lived on there from year to year, in a state of permanent moaning as far as I could apprehend. She is a very intelligent and vivacious person, and having been used to the best French society, bears but ill this exile from the common civilities of life. I wish Dr. Wiseman, of whose childhood and manhood she spoke with touching pride, would ask her to minister to the

domestic rites of his bishop's palace in Westminster ; there would be no hesitation, I fancy, in her acceptance of the invitation. Agreeable as she and her daughter were, however, we fled from Fano after three days, and, finding ourselves cheated out of our dream of summer coolness, resolved on substituting for it what the Italians call 'un bel giro.' So we went to Ancona, a striking sea city, holding up against the brown rocks and elbowing out the purple tides, beautiful to look upon. An exfoliation of the rock itself, you would call the houses that seem to grow there, so identical is the colour and character. I should like to visit Ancona again when there is a little air and shadow ; we stayed a week as it was, living upon fish and cold water. 'Water, water,' was the cry all day long, and really you should have seen me (or you should not have seen me) lying on the sofa, and demoralized out of all sense of female vanity, not to say decency, with dishevelled hair at full length, and 'sans gown, sans stays, sans shoes, sans everything,' except a petticoat and white dressing wrapper. I said something feebly once about the waiter ; but I don't think I meant it for earnest, for when Robert said, 'Oh, don't mind, dear,' certainly I didn't mind in the least. People *don't*, I suppose, when they are in ovens, or in exhausted receivers. Never before did I guess what heat was—that's sure. We went to Loreto for a day, back through Ancona, Sinigaglia (oh, I forgot to tell you, there was no fair this year at Sinigaglia ; Italy will be content, I suppose, with selling her honour), Fano, Pesaro, Rimini to Ravenna, back again over the Apennines from Forli. A 'bel giro,' wasn't it ? Ravenna, where Robert positively wanted to go to live once, has

itself put an end to those yearnings. The churches are wonderful: holding an atmosphere of purple glory, and if one could live just in them, or in Dante's tomb—well, otherwise keep me from Ravenna. The very antiquity of the houses is whitewashed, and the marshes on all sides send up stenches new and old, till the hot air is sick with them. To get to the pine forest, which is exquisite, you have to go a mile along the canal, the exhalations pursuing you step for step, and, what ruffled me more than all beside, we were not admitted into the house of Dante's tomb 'without an especial permission from the authorities.' Quite furious I was about this, and both of us too angry to think of applying: but we stood at the grated window and read the pathetic inscription as plainly as if we had touched the marble. We stood there between three and four in the morning, and then went straight on to Florence from that tomb of the exiled poet. Just what we should have done, had the circumstances been arranged in a dramatic intention. From Forli, the air grew pure and quick again; and the exquisite, almost visionary scenery of the Apennines, the wonderful variety of shape and colour, the sudden transitions and vital individuality of those mountains, the chestnut forests dropping by their own weight into the deep ravines, the rock cloven and clawed by the living torrents, and the hills, hill above hill, piling up their grand existences as if they did it themselves, changing colour in the effort—of these things I cannot give you any idea, and if words could not, painting could not either. Indeed, the whole scenery of our journey, except when we approached the coast, was full of beauty. The first time we crossed the

Apennines (near Borgo San Sepolcro) we did it by moonlight, and the flesh was weak, and one fell asleep, and saw things between sleep and wake, only the effects were grand and singular so, even though of course we lost much in the distinctness. Well, but you will understand from all this that we were delighted to get home—*I* was, I assure you. Florence seemed as cool as an oven after the fire; indeed, we called it quite cool, and I took possession of my own chair and put up my feet on the cushions and was charmed, both with having been so far and coming back so soon. Three weeks brought us home.”

In reading this last letter, one begins to realize that Mrs. Browning’s correspondents had the most unusual happiness of receiving descriptive letters from Italy that were not a mere confusion of names and exclamations, the familiar food of the waste-paper basket. Her descriptions of scenery have a very notable richness and condensation; moreover, they are never without what Mr. Henry James has called * her “nameless intellectual, if it be not rather a moral, grace—a vibration never suggesting ‘manner,’ as often in her verse;” she sets her mark on these fine, romantic pictures, which are drawn from no guide-book and inspired by no wish to chronicle picturesque sensations.

But Guercino!—here, as I have already indicated, she undoubtedly taxes our affection. Why could she not sound an original note in speaking of pictures, as she always can at other times? In the same letter we have her first impression of *Modern Painters*—

“The first letter in which you mentioned your Oxford

* “William Wetmore Story and his Friends” (1903).

student caught us in the midst of his work upon art. Very vivid, very graphic, full of sensibility, but inconsequent in some of the reasoning, it seemed to me, and rather flashy than full in the metaphysics. Robert, who knows a good deal about art, to which knowledge I of course have no pretence, could agree with him only by snatches, and we, both of us, standing before a very expressive picture of Domenichino's (the 'David'—at Fano) wondered how he could blaspheme so against a great artist. Still, he is no ordinary man, and for a critic to be so much a poet is a great thing. Also, we have by no means, I should imagine, seen the utmost of his stature."

It would be amusing, if it were not rather provoking, to watch the sedate preferences of Browning, "who knows a good deal about art," scandalized by the wayward genius of Ruskin. A profound shudder passed through every Englishman in Italy in those days at the thought that this beautiful writer should also be so impious an iconoclast. It is a difficult admission to make, but it must be confessed that both Browning and his wife lose originality as they stand before pictures; although, of course, when it comes to dealing, not with the picture, but with the point of view behind it, with the intricate motives of the painter in painting, then Browning is upon his own ground.

The winter of 1848-9 passed uneventfully among the same quiet sociabilities as the preceding winter. Mrs. Browning was steadily at work on a theme that interested her more than it ever interested her public, in "*Casa Guidi Windows.*" The artists and writers, American and English, who visited her found her sitting in a deep chair by the

fire, with tiny materials for writing at her side, which she quietly put aside as they came in. She talked to them with a certain fragile sweetness, while Browning strode robustly across the room, the house echoing with his genial laugh.

In March of the following year, 1849, a joy and a sorrow broke in upon their peaceful life, both set in the half-farcical turbulence of the brief Florentine revolution, which had at last been brought off. On the 9th of the month a son was born, and a few days later the news came that Browning's mother had not lived to hear of it. On April 30th, Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford—

“ I am writing to you, *at last*, you will say, ever dearest Miss Mitford ; but, except once to Wimpole Street, this is the first packet of letters which goes from me since my confinement. You will have heard how our joy turned suddenly into deep sorrow by the death of my husband's mother. An unsuspected disease (ossification of the heart) terminated in a fatal way, and she lay in the insensibility precursive of the grave's, when the letter, written in such gladness by my poor husband, and announcing the birth of his child, reached her address. ‘ It would have made her heart bound,’ said her daughter to us. Poor, tender heart ! the last throb was too near. The medical men would not allow the news to be communicated. The next joy she felt was to be in heaven itself. My husband has been in the deepest anguish, and indeed, except for the courageous consideration of his sister, who wrote two letters of preparation, saying that ‘ she was not well,’ and she ‘ was very ill,’ when in fact all was over, I am frightened to think what the result would have been to him. He has loved his mother

as such passionate natures only can love, and I never saw a man so bowed down in an extremity of sorrow—never. Even now the depression is great, and sometimes when I leave him alone a little and return to the room, I find him in tears. I do earnestly wish to change the scene and air; but where to go? England looks terrible now. He says it would break his heart to see his mother's roses over the wall, and the place where she used to lay her scissors and gloves. Which I understand so thoroughly that I can't say, "Let us go to England." We must wait and see what his father and sister will choose to do or choose us to do, for of course a duty plainly seen would draw us anywhere. My own dearest sisters will be painfully disappointed by any change of plan, only they are too good and kind not to understand the difficulty, not to see the motive. So do you, I am certain. It has been very, very painful altogether, this drawing together of life and death. Robert was too enraptured at my safety, and with his little son, and the sudden reaction was terrible. You see how natural that was. How kind of you to write that note to him full of affectionate expressions towards me! Thank you, dearest friend . . .

" . . . Since I wrote last to you, I think we have had two revolutions here at Florence, Grand Duke out, Grand Duke in. The bells in the church opposite rang for both. They first planted a tree of liberty close to our door, and then they pulled it down. The same tune, sung under the windows, did for 'Viva la republica!' and 'Viva Leopoldo!' The genuine popular feeling is certainly for the Grand Duke ('O santissima madre di Dio!' said our nurse, clasping her hands, 'how the people do love him!'); only

nobody would run the risk of a pin's prick to save the ducal throne. If the Leghornese, who put up Guerazzi on its ruins, had not refused to pay at certain Florentine cafés, we shouldn't have had revolution the second, and all this shooting in the street! Dr. Harding, who was coming to see me, had time to get behind a stable door, just before there was a fall against it of four shot corpses; and Robert barely managed to get home across the bridges. He had been out walking in the city, apprehending nothing, when the storm gathered and broke. Sad and humiliating it all has been, and the author of '*Vanity Fair*' might turn it to better uses for a chapter. By the way, we have just been reading '*Vanity Fair*.' Very clever, very effective, but cruel to human nature. A painful book, and not the pain that purifies and exalts. Partial truths after all, and those not wholesome. But I certainly had no idea that Mr. Thackeray had intellectual force for such a book; the power is considerable."

In the birth of her son Mrs. Browning could not but see a providential opening for a reconciliation with her father. Her brothers, too, or some of them, still after more than two years held out against her appeals to them. From the letter which I next quote, written on May 14, 1849, to Mrs. Martin, it will be seen that this good friend had attempted to intercede for her. The blanks are to be filled up with the names of three or four of her brothers—names which were omitted when the letter was first printed, and need not be replaced—

" . . . Surely I ought especially to thank you, dearest kind friend, for your goodness in writing to —, of which

Henrietta very properly told me. I never shall forget this and other proofs of your affection for me, and shall remember them with warm gratitude always. As to —, I have held out both [my] hands, and my husband's hands in mine, again and again to him ; he cannot possibly, in the secret place of his heart, expect more from either of us. My husband would have written to him in the first place, but for the obstacles raised by himself and others, and now what *could* Robert write and say except the bare repetition of what I have said over and over for him and myself ? It is exactly an excuse—not more and not less. Just before I was ill I sent my last messages, because, with certain hazards before me, my heart turned to them naturally. I might as well have turned to a rock. — has been by far the kindest, and has written to me two or three little notes, and one since the birth of our child. I love them all far too well to be proud, and my husband loves me too well not to wish to be friends with every one of them ; we have neither of us any stupid feeling about ‘keeping up our dignity.’ Yes, I had a letter from — some time ago, in which something was said of Robert’s being careless of reconciliation. I answered it most explicitly and affectionately, with every possible assurance from Robert, and offering them from himself the affection of a brother. Not a word in answer ! To my poor dearest papa I have written very lately, and as my letter has not, after a week, been sent back, I catch at the hope of his being moved a little. If he neither sends it back nor replies severely, I shall take courage to write to him again after a while. It will be an immense gain to get him only to read my letters. My father and my brothers hold quite different positions, of

course, and though he has acted sternly towards me, I, knowing his peculiarities, do not feel embittered and astonished and disappointed as in the other cases. Absolutely happy my marriage has been—never could there be a happier marriage (as there are no marriages in heaven); but dear Henrietta is quite wrong in fancying, or seeming to fancy, that this quarrel with my family has given or gives me slight pain. Old affections are not so easily trodden out of me, indeed, and while I live unreconciled to them, there must be a void and a drawback."

Mrs. Browning was extremely anxious to adapt their plans for the summer to suit the convenience of her husband's father and sister. Browning himself shrank too deeply from the idea of England to admit of their going home. The letter I have quoted shows how passionately he mourned his mother's death: he could not face his home without her. But it seemed possible that Mr. Browning the elder and his daughter might come to them in Italy for a time. The next letter is the first which I quote from a series written by Mrs. Browning to her sister-in-law, whom she had not yet seen, but with whom she corresponded affectionately—

"I must say to my dearest Sarianna how delighted we are at the thought of seeing her in Florence. I wish it had been before the autumn, but since autumn is decided for we must be content to reap our golden harvest at the time for such things. Certainly the summer heat of Florence is terrible enough—only we should have carried you with us into the shade somewhere to the sea or to the mountains—and Robert has, of course, told you of our

Spezzia plan. The ‘fatling of the flock’ has been sheared closely of his long petticoats. Did he tell you that? And you can’t think how funny the little creature looks without his train, his wise baby face appearing to approve of the whole arrangement. He talks to himself now and smiles at everybody, and admired my roses so much the other day that he wanted to eat them; having a sublime transcendental notion about the mouth being the receptacle of all beauty and glory in this world. Tell your dear father that certainly he *is* a ‘sweet baby,’ there’s no denying it. . . . Robert’s nursing does not mend his spirits much. I shall be very glad to get him away from Florence; he has suffered too much here to rally as I long to see him do, because, dearest Sarianna, we have to live after all; and to live rightly we must turn our faces forward and press forward, and not look backward morbidly for the footsteps in the dust of those beloved ones who travelled with us but yesterday. They themselves are not behind, but before, and we carry with us our tenderness living and undiminished towards them, to be completed when the round of this life is complete for us also. Dearest Sarianna, why do I say such things, but because I have known what grief is? Oh, and how I could have compounded with you, grief for grief, mine for yours, for *I* had no last words nor gestures, Sarianna. God keep you from such a helpless bitter agony as mine then was. Dear Sarianna, you will think of us and of Florence, my dear sister, and remember how you have made us a promise and have to keep it.”

The plan was not carried out, however, and Mrs. Browning did not see her husband’s family until two years later. In July of this summer, 1849, they chose for

their summer retreat a place to which they returned more than once in later years—the Baths of Lucca, then a not unfashionable little watering-place, amid plunging hills and chestnut woods, a few miles from the town of Lucca proper. From there Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford a letter full of delicious glimpses of the gorgeous, soundless Italian summer, and of her happiness in her child, at this time known as Wiedeman (the family name of Mrs. Browning the elder), but afterwards by his self-bestowed nickname of Penini—

“At last, you will say, dearest friend. The truth is, I have not been forgetting you (how far from that!) but wandering in search of cool air and a cool bough among all the olive trees to build our summer nest on. My husband has been suffering beyond what one could shut one’s eyes to in consequence of the great mental shock of last March—loss of appetite, loss of sleep, looks quite worn and altered. His spirits never rallied except with an effort, and every letter from New Cross threw him back into deep depressions. I was very anxious, and feared much that the end of it all (the intense heat of Florence assisting) would be a nervous fever or something similar. And I had the greatest difficulty in persuading him to leave Florence for a month or two—he, who generally delights so in travelling, had no mind for change or movement. I had to say and swear that baby and I couldn’t bear the heat, and that we must and would go away. *Ce que femme veut*, if the latter is at all reasonable, or the former persevering. At last I gained the victory. It was agreed that we two should go on an exploring journey to find out where we could have most

shadow at least expense ; and we left our child with his nurse and Wilson while we were absent. We went along the coast to Spezzia, saw Carrara with the white marble mountains, passed through the olive forests and the vineyards, avenues of acacia trees, chestnut woods, glorious surprises of most exquisite scenery. I say olive forests advisedly ; the olive grows like a forest tree in those regions, shading the ground with tents of silvery network. The olive near Florence is but a shrub in comparison, and I have learnt to despise a little, too, the Florentine vine, which does not swing such portcullises of massive dewy green from one tree to another as along the whole road where we travelled. Beautiful, indeed, it was. Spezzia wheels the blue sea into the arms of the wooded mountains, and we had a glance at Shelley's house at Lerici. It was melancholy to me, of course. I was not sorry that the lodgings we inquired about were far above our means. We returned on our steps (after two days in the dirtiest of possible inns), saw Seravezza, a village in the mountains, where rock, river, and wood enticed us to stay, and the inhabitants drove us off by their unreasonable prices. It is curious, but just in proportion to the want of civilization the prices rise in Italy. If you haven't cups and saucers you are made to pay for plate. Well, so finding no rest for the sole of our feet, I persuaded Robert to go to the Baths of Lucca, only to see them. We were to proceed afterwards to San Marcello or some safer wilderness. We had both of us, but he chiefly, the strongest prejudice against these Baths of Lucca, taking them for a sort of wasp's nest of scandal and gaming, and expecting to find everything trodden flat by the Continental English ; yet I wanted to

see the place, because it is ■ place to see after all. So we came, and were so charmed by the exquisite beauty of the scenery, by the coolness of the climate and the absence of our countrymen, political troubles serving admirably our private requirements, that we made an offer for rooms on the spot, and returned to Florence for baby and the rest of our establishment without further delay. Here we are, then ; we have been here more than a fortnight. . . . We have taken a sort of eagle's nest in this place, the highest house of the highest of the three villages which are called the Bagni di Lucca, and which lie at the heart of a hundred mountains sung to continually by a rushing mountain stream. The sound of the river and of the cicala is all the noise we hear. Austrian drums and carriage wheels cannot vex us ; God be thanked for it ; the silence is full of joy and consolation. I think my husband's spirits are better already and his appetite improved. Certainly little babe's great cheeks are growing rosier and rosier . . . The air of this place seems to penetrate the heart and not the lungs only ; it draws you, raises you, excites you. Mountain air without its keenness, sheathed in Italian sunshine, think what *that* must be ! And the beauty and the solitude—for with a few paces we get free of the habitations of men—all is delightful to me. What is peculiarly beautiful and wonderful is the variety of the shapes of the mountains. They are a multitude, and yet there is no likeness. None, except where the golden mist comes and transfigures them into one glory. For the rest, the mountain there wrapt in the chestnut forest is not like that bare peak which tilts against the sky, nor like that serpent twine of another which seems to move and coil in the moving coiling shadow. Oh, I

wish you were here. You would enjoy the shade of the chestnut trees, and the sound of the waterfalls, and at nights seem to be living among the stars ; the fireflies are so thick, you would like that too."

I must quote a postscript added in Browning's writing to a letter of his wife's to Mrs. Jameson, which belongs to these weeks—

"DEAR AUNT NINA,

"Will there be three years before I see you again ? And Geddie ; does she not come to Italy ? When we passed through Pisa the other day, we went to your old inn in love of you, and got your very room to dine in (the landlord is dead and gone, as is Peveruda—of the other house, you remember). There were the old vile prints, the old look-out into the garden, with its orange trees and painted sentinel watching them. Ba must have told you about our babe, and the little else there is to tell—that is, for *her* to tell, for she is not likely to encroach upon *my* story which I *could* tell of her entirely angel nature, as divine a heart as God ever made ; I know more of her every day ; I, who thought I knew something of her five years ago ! "

Beside these must be put another little picture from a letter to Mrs. Jameson—

"We have had much quiet enjoyment here in spite of everything, read some amusing books (Dumas and Sue —shake your head !), and seen our child grow fuller of roses and understanding day by day. Before he was six months old he would stretch out his hands and his feet

too, when bidden to do so, and his little mouth to kiss you. This is said to be a miracle of forwardness among the learned. He knows Robert and me quite well as ‘Papa’ and ‘Mama,’ and laughs for joy when he meets us out of doors. Robert is very fond of him, and threw me into a fit of hilarity the other day by springing away from his newspaper in an indignation against me because he hit his head against the floor rolling over and over. ‘Oh, Ba, I really can’t trust you !’ Down Robert was on the carpet in a moment, to protect the precious head. He takes it to be made of Venetian glass, I am certain.”

In October they returned home to Casa Guidi for the winter. With a slight sense of shame, perhaps, we may confess to a relief that Mrs. Browning had by this time dropped for a while her too insistent enthusiasm for the cause of liberty. The new spirit which had stirred in Italy during the preceding winter seemed to be choked for the present, and indeed it did not revive for some years. In the north the Austrians had had their way. Piedmont had been decisively defeated, and the Florentines, as we have seen, had taken back their Grand Duke to their arms. In Rome, under the protection of France, Pius IX. had effectually belied his old reputation for liberalism ; and as for the south, Naples and Sicily had acquiesced in the Bourbons. Mrs. Browning, grieving for the faint hearts of Italian patriots, turned to her own work. The winter of 1849–1850 was spent in preparing a collected edition of her poems, to include most of what she had already published in her volumes of 1838 and 1844—all of it, however, carefully revised—with certain new additions,

notably the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Browning was also working at a new volume, which appeared in 1850 as "Christmas Eve and Easter Day."

During the autumn they made a friend in that rather mysterious American sibyl, Margaret Fuller, well known from the highly coloured portrait which Nathaniel Hawthorne gave of her as Zenobia in the "Blithedale Romance," who had now turned up with a most unexpected husband. A few extracts, beginning with one in which this new friendship is described, will give some account of Mrs. Browning's occupations and interests during the next months, which still had for background her grief at her father's obduracy.

"The American authoress, Miss Fuller, with whom we had had some slight intercourse by letter, and who has been at Rome during the siege, as a devoted friend of the republicans and a meritorious attendant on the hospitals, has taken us by surprise at Florence, retiring from the Roman field with a husband and child above a year old. Nobody had even suspected a word of this underplot, and her American friends stood in mute astonishment before this apparition of them here. The husband is a Roman marquis, appearing amiable and gentlemanly, and having fought well, they say, at the siege, but with no pretension to cope with his wife on any ground appertainiug to the intellect. She talks, and he listens. I always wonder at that species of marriage ; but people are so different in their matrimonial ideals that it may answer sometimes."

"So you prefer 'Shirley' to 'Jane Eyre' ! Yet I hear from nobody such an opinion ; yet you are very probably

right, for ‘Shirley’ may suffer from the natural reaction of the public mind. What you tell me of Tennyson interests me as everything about him must. I like to think of him digging gardens—room for cabbage and all. At the same time, what he says about the public ‘*hating* poetry’ is certainly not a word for Tennyson. Perhaps no true poet, having claims upon attention *solely* through his poetry, has attained so certain a success with such short delay. Instead of being pelted (as nearly every true poet has been), he stands already on a pedestal, and is recognized as a master spirit not by a coterie but by the great public. Three large editions of the ‘Princess’ have already been sold. If he isn’t satisfied after all, I think he is wrong. Divine poet as he is, and no laurel being too leafy for him, yet he must be an unreasonable man, and not understanding of the growth of the laurel trees and the nature of a reading public.”

“I have read ‘Shirley’ lately; it is not equal to ‘Jane Eyre’ in spontaneousness and earnestness. I found it heavy, I confess, though in the mechanical part of the writing—the compositional *savoir faire*—there is an advance. Robert has exhumed some French books, just now, from a little circulating library which he had not tried, and we have been making ourselves uncomfortable over Balzac’s ‘Cousin Pons.’ But what a wonderful writer he is! Who else could have taken such a subject, out of the lowest mud of humanity, and glorified and consecrated it? He is wonderful—there is not another word for him—profound, as Nature is. I complain of Florence for the want of books. We have to dig and dig before we can get anything new, and I can read the newspapers only through Robert’s

eyes, who only can read them at Vieusseux's in a room sacred from the foot of woman. And this isn't always satisfactory to me, as whenever he falls into a state of disgust with any political *régime*, he throws the whole subject over and won't read a word more about it. Every now and then, for instance, he ignores France altogether, and I, who am more tolerant and more curious, find myself suspended over an hiatus (*valde deflendus*), and what's to be said and done?"

In April came the news of Henrietta Barrett's marriage and simultaneous banishment from her home.

"A letter from Henrietta and her husband, glowing with happiness; it makes *me* happy. She says, 'I wonder if I shall be as happy as you, Ba.' God grant it. It was signified to her that she should at once give up her engagement of five years, or leave the house. She married directly. I do not understand how it could be otherwise, indeed. My brothers have been kind and affectionate, I am glad to say; in her case, poor dearest papa does injustice chiefly to his own nature, by these severities, hard as they seem."

It will be remembered that on Wordsworth's death, in 1850, the *Athenæum* quaintly urged that the Laureateship should be given to Mrs. Browning. She writes on June 15—

"As for the Laureateship, it won't be given to *me*, be sure, though the suggestion has gone the round of the English newspapers—'Galignani' and all—and notwithstanding that most kind and flattering recommendation

of the *Athenaeum*, for which I am sure we should be grateful to Mr. Chorley. I think Leigh Hunt should have the Laureateship. He has condescended to wish for it, and has ‘worn his singing clothes’ longer than most of his contemporaries, deserving the price of long as well as noble service. Whoever has it will be, of course, exempted from Court lays; and the distinction of the title and pension should remain for Spenser’s sake, if not for Wordsworth’s. We are very anxious to know about Tennyson’s new work, ‘In Memoriam.’ Do tell us about it.”

I quote out of its place a later letter giving her impressions of “In Memoriam” after she read it.

“As to ‘In Memoriam,’ I have seen it, I have read it—dear Mr. Kenyon had the goodness to send it to me by an American traveller—and now I really do disagree with you, for the book has gone to my heart and soul; I think it full of deep pathos and beauty. All I wish away is the marriage hymn at the end, and *that* for every reason I wish away—it’s a discord in the music. The monotony is a part of the position—the sea is monotonous, and so is lasting grief. Your complaint is against fate and humanity rather than against the poet Tennyson. Who that has suffered has not felt wave after wave break dully against one rock, till brain and heart, with all their radiances, seemed lost in a single shadow? So the effect of the book is artistic, I think, and indeed I do not wonder at the opinion which has reached us from various quarters that Tennyson stands higher through having written it. You see, what he appeared to want, according to the view of many, was an earnest personality and direct purpose.

In this last book, though of course there is not room in it for that exercise of creative faculty which elsewhere established his fame, he appeals heart to heart, directly as from his own to the universal heart, and we all feel him nearer to us—*I do*—and so do others."

In the summer of 1850, Mrs. Browning was attacked with a somewhat severe illness, and their annual flight to the country was deferred until September. This year the place selected was Siena, and from there she writes to another new friend, Miss Isa Blagden, an English resident in Florence, to whom they both became much attached.

"We arrived quite safely, and I was not too tired to sleep at night, though tired of course, and the baby was a miracle of goodness all the way, only inclining once to a *rabbia* through not being able to get at the electric telegraph, but in ecstasies otherwise at everything new. We had to stay at the inn all night. We heard of a multitude of villas, none of which could be caught in time for the daylight. On Sunday, however, just as we were beginning to give it up, in Robert came with good news, and we were settled in half an hour afterwards here, a small house of some seven rooms, two miles from Siena, and situated delightfully in its own grounds of vineyard and olive ground, not to boast too much of a pretty little square flower-garden. The grapes hang in garlands (too tantalizing to Wiedeman) about the walls and before them, and, through and over, we have magnificent views of a noble sweep of country, undulating hills and various verdure, and, on one side, the great Maremma extending to the foot of the Roman mountains. Our villa is on a hill called 'poggio,

dei venti,' and the winds give us a turn accordingly at every window. It is delightfully cool, and I have not been able to bear my window open at night since our arrival ; also we get good milk and bread and eggs and wine, and are not much at a loss for anything. Think of my forgetting to tell you (Robert would not forgive me for that) how we have a *specola* or sort of belvedere at the top of the house, which he delights in, and which I shall enjoy presently, when I have recovered my taste for climbing staircases. He carried me up once, but the being carried down was so much like being carried down the flue of a chimney, that I waive the whole privilege for the future. What is better, to my mind, is the expected fact of being able to get books at Siena—*nearly* as well as at Brecker's, really ; though Dumas fils seems to fill up many of the interstices where you think you have found something. *Three* pauls a month, the subscription is ; and for seven, we get a 'Galignani,' or are promised to get it. We pay for our villa ten scudi the month, so that altogether it is not ruinous. The air is as fresh as English air, without English dampness and transition ; yes, and we have English lanes with bowery tops of trees, and brambles and blackberries, and not a wall anywhere, except the walls of our villa."

Before leaving Florence she had had a severe shock in learning the tragic fate of Margaret Fuller (Madame Ossoli), who, with her husband and child, was drowned on her way back to America.

"What still further depressed me during our latter days at Florence was the dreadful event in America—the loss of our poor friend Madame Ossoli, affecting in itself, and also

through association with that past, when the arrowhead of anguish was broken too deeply into my life ever to be quite drawn out. Robert wanted to keep the news from me till I was stronger, but we live too *close* for him to keep anything from me, and then I should have known it from the first letter or visitor, so there was no use trying. The poor Ossolis spent part of their last evening in Italy with us, he and she and their child, and we had a note from her off Gibraltar, speaking of the captain's death from smallpox. Afterwards it appears that her child caught the disease and lay for days between life and death ; *recovered*, and then came the final agony. ‘Deep called unto deep,’ indeed. Now she is where there is no more grief and ‘no more sea ;’ and none of the restless in this world, none of the shipwrecked in heart ever seemed to me to want peace more than she did. We saw much of her last winter ; and over a great gulf of differing opinion we both felt drawn strongly to her. High and pure aspiration she had—yes, and a tender woman’s heart—and we honoured the truth and courage in her, rare in woman or man.”

In November they returned to Florence for another quiet winter of work, during which Mrs. Browning finished the second part of “Casa Guidi Windows.” The letters of these months are few, and I shall only quote from one, dated Jan. 30, 1851, which gives some account of their life and habits.

“I am quite well, and looking well, they say ; but the frightful illness of the autumn left me paler and thinner long after the perfect recovery. The physician told Robert afterwards that few women would have recovered at all ;

and when I left Siena I was as able to walk, and as well in every respect as ever, notwithstanding everything—think, for instance, of my walking to St. Miniato, here in Florence! You remember, perhaps, what that pull is. I dare say you heard from Henrietta how we enjoyed our rustication at Siena. It is pleasant even to look back on it. We were obliged to look narrowly at the economies, more narrowly than usual ; but the cheapness of the place suited the occasion, and the little villa, like a mere tent among the vines, charmed us, though the doors didn't shut, and though (on account of the smallness) Robert and I had to whisper all our talk whenever Wiedeman was asleep. Oh, I wish you were in Italy. I wish you had come here this winter which has been so mild, and which, with ordinary prudence, would certainly have suited dear Mr. Martin. . . . I tried to dissuade the Peyton's from making the experiment, through the fear of its not answering. . . . We can't get them into society, you see, because we are out of it, having struggled to keep out of it with hands and feet, and partially having succeeded, knowing scarcely anybody except bringers of letters of introduction, and those chiefly Americans and not residents in Florence. The other day, however, Mrs. Trollope and her daughter-in-law called on us, and it is settled that we are to know them ; though Robert had made a sort of vow never to sit in the same room with the author of certain books directed against liberal institutions and Victor Hugo's poetry. I had a longer battle to fight, on the matter of this vow, than any since my marriage, and had some scruples at last of taking advantage of the pure goodness which induced him to yield to my wishes ; but I *did*,

because I hate to seem ungracious and unkind to people ; and human beings, besides, are better than their books, than their principles, and even than their everyday actions, sometimes. I am always crying out : ‘Blessed be the inconsistency of men.’ Then I thought it probable that, the first shock of the cold water being over, he would like the proposed new acquaintances very much—and so it turns out.”

We have now followed Mrs. Browning through nearly five years of marriage, and it is almost startling to realize that we find ourselves watching a different woman. In the old Wimpole Street days she seemed to have lost her youth and freshness, with scarcely an effort to save them. She had become a middle-aged woman, cheerful and resigned, like one who realizes that life will not offer her its best gifts, but is determined to make the most of the interests that remain. In that mood she passed beyond the time when changes still appear possible. Her life became fixed ; it had taken its shape, and with the final impress of maturity there was little room to doubt that beyond certain warm friendly affections and an ardour for literature, everything else had been left out. The seeds of passion, the beginnings of a wider interest in the world, had no doubt been there, but the appointed scheme of her existence found no room for them to expand, and they seemed to have been crushed and destroyed. By forty the lines of a life have stiffened. Circumstances may still utterly change its environment ; character may soften or grow hard. But the general structure of the mind will remain the same, and forty is not likely to wear a very different face from forty-five.

Then suddenly the most unlooked-for gift of life fell from the skies. Long after she believed the last possibility to have disappeared, the cup of passion was swiftly and imperiously brought to her lips. With a sundering of all the old fibres of her life, she drank it to the full. But more than this ; for passion, though it sends a new ichor racing through every vein, does not oust the central spirit of self —the little creature who sits behind the last door of the mind, and says “I am I ;” whereas with Elizabeth Barrett it seems at moments as if a new self has been substituted for the old. Her love coloured her life ; that was natural. Her liberation from the dull London room gave a new impulse to her enthusiasms ; that was also natural. But what is extremely rare and strange is to leave a woman, no longer young, grown into a certain circle of thought, literary and academic, and after five years to find her with the walls of the chamber thrown down, and her mind ranging masterfully over men and affairs. Such a change, coming so late, is not fully explained by a mere reference to the change in her external circumstances. That in itself will not graft a new growth upon a mind whose sap is stayed and blossom set. Perhaps the explanation is that in her case the mind had not reached maturity, even by middle age. The prostration of her health up to the time of her marriage was certainly due far less to any real bodily disease, than to a kind of nervous obsession—it was hysterical, in short, though unaccompanied by the symptoms commonly associated with the word. Under this pressure the full life of her mind lay dormant ; when it was removed by her sudden translation to a natural and healthy life, it spread the wings that had hitherto been sheathed. The literary

recluse, accustomed to hide her feelings and to talk about books, became in a few months a politician, breathlessly watching the balance of parties in foreign countries, and a patriot (however vicarious) who shed tears when Charles Albert was defeated at Novara. I do not think the result was altogether a gain. In a former chapter I referred to the common sense, the feeling for proportion, which she always showed in her old enthusiasms. But when she flung herself with the same headlong impetuosity into the world of affairs, one is conscious of a loss of balance, a lack of restraint, as if the untried wings beat the air without finding support. Indeed, in later years, as we shall see, her spirit, pure and noble as it was, seemed to lavish itself beyond the limit of dignity upon the cause which she had so much at heart. Moreover, her sympathy with humanity did not keep pace with her love of freedom. An intolerance for weakness makes itself felt; and as for the indiscriminating scorn which she hurled against what appeared to her to be intolerance, I would instance certain passages of excessive violence in "*Casa Guidi Windows*," notably where she writes of the Roman Catholic Church. This is not the spirit which brought liberty into the world, but the spirit which tried to destroy it by fire and torture.

And yet, after all, the fire that is brought among men by excess of feeling is a greater gift, even if at times it has turned against their bodies and their homes, than the blight which the lack of feeling throws over heart and mind. Elizabeth Browning had a soul of fire, and it was she herself who was wounded by the stinging flame. There are not so many who have felt the live coal from the altar that we can call that divine madness dearly bought.

VII

PARIS, LONDON, ITALY

1851-1856

SUMMER after summer since her marriage Mrs. Browning had tried to plan a visit to England, few as were the ties which drew her there. Such good friends as Miss Mitford, Mr. Kenyon, Mrs. Martin, she naturally longed to see after five years of absence, more than ever when she had a stout and rosy baby of her own to show them. Browning's father, too, and his good sister Sarianna, both of whom had written so warmly from the first, looked eagerly forward to seeing him again with a wife and son. Most of all, Arabel Barrett, who had now seen the door of her stern home shut for ever upon both her sisters, waited for her return to England ; and it was to see her that Mrs. Browning most longed to come within reach of her home. Moreover, she had not lost a faint hope that if her father heard she was actually at hand, he might be induced to see her, not to ask her forgiveness for the cruel wrong he had done her—she did not expect or dream of that—but to forgive her for what she had done ; she was quite ready that the terms of reconciliation should be as he chose.

But every summer something had hindered their leaving

Italy. Before they finally settled at Casa Guidi, they had been spending money too freely to allow the expense of a journey to England ; though since their child's birth Mr. Kenyon had generously insisted on allowing them a hundred pounds a year. A fixed abode of their own was more economical than a constant succession of furnished rooms ; besides, her volumes the year before had doubtless brought in certain returns ; but in that year her health had not been equal to the journey. In this summer (1851), however, all obstacles were at last removed, and an extended tour was planned, to begin with Rome and Naples, to include a visit to England, and to end in Paris. The first part had to be abandoned, partly from considerations of expense ; and when they left Florence late in May it was to go direct to Venice. From there Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford on June 4—

"I have been between heaven and earth since our arrival at Venice. The heaven of it is ineffable. Never had I touched the skirts of so celestial a place. The beauty of the architecture, the silver trails of water up between all that gorgeous colour and carving, the enchanting silence, the moonlight, the music, the gondolas—I mix it all up together, and maintain that nothing is like it, nothing equal to it, not a second Venice in the world. Do you know, when I came first I felt as if I never could go away. But now comes the earth side. Robert, after sharing the ecstasy, grows uncomfortable, and nervous, and unable to eat or sleep ; and poor Wilson, still worse, in a miserable condition of continual sickness and headache. Alas for these mortal Venices—so exquisite

and so bilious ! Therefore I am constrained away from my joys by sympathy, and am forced to be glad that we are going off on Friday. For myself, it does not affect me at all. I like these moist, soft, relaxing climates ; even the scirocco doesn't touch me much. And the baby grows gloriously fatter in spite of everything.

"No, indeed and indeed, we are not going to England for the sake of the Exposition. How could you fancy such a thing, even once ? In any case we shall not reach London till late, and if by any arrangement I could see my sister Arabel in France or on the coast of England, we would persuade Robert's family to meet us there, and not see London at all. Ah, if you knew how abhorrent the thought of England is to *me* ! Well, we must not talk of it. My eyes shut suddenly when my thoughts go that way.

"Tell me exactly how you are. I heartily rejoice that you have decided at last about the other house, so as to avoid the danger of another autumn and winter in the damp. Do you write still for Mr. Chorley's periodical, and how does it go on ? Here in Italy the fame of it does not penetrate. As for Venice, you can't get even a *Times*, much less an *Athenæum*. We comfort ourselves by taking a box at the opera (the whole box on the ground tier, mind) for two shillings and eightpence English. Also, every evening at half-past eight, Robert and I are sitting under the moon in the great piazza of St. Mark, taking excellent coffee and reading the French papers. Can you fancy me so ? "

After a month in Venice they went by rapid stages through Milan, Lucerne, and Strasburg to Paris. One

of Mrs. Browning's welcome descriptive letters, written from Paris to Mr. Kenyon, gives an account of the journey. Having insisted on her contented acquiescence in the orthodox artistic enthusiasms of her day, I must not pass by her discovery of the "Lombard school," of which she speaks in this letter. But even if Leonardo and Luini, whom she doubtless means, now replace Guido and Guercino, it will be admitted that it is to no gain in the language in which she speaks of pictures; there is no heightening in the tone, no desire to give more to a picture than a single "delightful" or "sublime;" moreover, the Venetian masters, after a month of blissful excitement in Venice, are not so much as mentioned.

"We slept at Padua" (she writes) "on St. Anthony's night (more's the pity for us: they made us pay sixteen zwanzigers for it!), and Robert and I, leaving Wiedeman at the inn, took a calèche and drove over to Arqua, which I had set my heart on seeing for Petrarch's sake. Did you ever see it, *you*? And didn't it move you, the sight of that little room where the great soul exhaled itself? Even Robert's man's eyes had tears in them as we stood there, and looked through the window at the green-peaked hills. And, do you know, I believe in 'the cat.'

"Through Brescia we passed by moonlight (such a flood of white moonlight) and got into Milan in the morning. There we stayed two days, and I climbed to the topmost pinnacle of the cathedral; wonder at me! Indeed I was rather overtired, it must be confessed—three hundred and fifty steps—but the sight was worth everything, enough to light up one's memory for ever,

How glorious that cathedral is ! worthy almost of standing face to face with the snow Alps ; and itself a sort of snow dream by an artist architect, taken asleep in a glacier ! Then the Da Vinci Christ did not disappoint us, which is saying much. It is divine. And the Lombard school generally was delightful after Bologna and those soulless Caracci ! I have even given up Guido, and Guercino too, since knowing more of them. Correggio, on the other hand, is sublime at Parma ; he is wonderful ! besides having the sense to make his little Christs and angels after the very likeness of my baby.

"From Milan we moved to Como, steamed down to Menaggio (opposite to Bellaggio), took a calèche to Porlezza, and a boat to Lugano, another calèche to Bellinzona, left Wiedeman there, and, returning on our steps, steamed down and up again the Lago Maggiore, went from Bellinzona to Faido and slept, and crossed the Mount St. Gothard the next day, catching the Lucerne steamer at Fluellen. The scenery everywhere was most exquisite, but of the great *pass* I shall say nothing—it was like standing in the presence of God when He is terrible. The tears overflowed my eyes. I think I never *saw* the sublime before. Do you know, I sate out in the coupé a part of the way with Robert so as to apprehend the whole sight better, with a thick shawl over my head, only letting out the eyes to see. They told us there was more snow than is customary at this time of year, and it well might be so, for the passage through it, cut for the carriage, left the snow-walls nodding over us at a great height on each side, and the cold was intense.

"Do you know, we might yield the palm, and that

Lucerne is far finer than any of our Italian lakes? Even Robert had to confess it at once. I wanted to stay in Switzerland, but we found it wiser to hasten our steps and come to Paris; so we came. Yes, and we travelled from Strasburg to Paris in four-and-twenty hours, night and day, never stopping except for a quarter of an hour's breakfast and half an hour's dinner. So afraid I was of the fatigue for Wiedeman! But between the unfinished railroad and the diligence, there's a complication of risks of losing places just now, and we were forced to go the whole way in a breath or to hazard being three or four days on the road. So we took the coupé and resigned ourselves, and poor little babe slept at night and laughed in the day, and came into Paris as fresh in spirit as if just alighted from the morning star, screaming out with delight at the shops! . . .

"Well, now we are in Paris and have to forget the 'belle chiese;' we have beautiful shops instead, false teeth grinning at the corners of the streets, and disreputable prints, and fascinating hats and caps, and brilliant restaurants, and M. le Président in a cocked hat and with a train of cavalry, passing like a rocket along the boulevards to an occasional yell from the Red. Oh yes, and don't mistake me! for I like it all extremely, it's a splendid city—a city in the country, as Venice is a city in the sea. And I'm as much amused as Wiedeman, who stands in the street before the printshops (to Wilson's great discomfort) and roars at the lions. And I admire the bright green trees and gardens everywhere in the heart of the town. Surely it is a most beautiful city! And I like the restaurants more than is reasonable; dining *à la carte*, and mixing up

one's dinner with heaps of newspapers, and the 'solution' by Emile de Girardin, who suggests that the next President should be a tailor. Moreover, we find apartments very cheap in comparison to what we feared, and we are in a comfortable quiet hotel, where it is possible, and not ruinous, to wait and look about one.

"As to England—oh England—how I dread to think of it! We talk of going over for a short time, but have not decided when; yet it will be soon perhaps—it may. If it were not for my precious Arabel, I would not go; because Robert's family would come to him here, they say. But to give up Arabel is impossible. Henrietta is in Somersetshire; it is uncertain whether I shall see her, even in going, and she too might come to Paris this winter. And you will come—you promised, I think? . . .

"I feel here *near enough* to England, that's the truth. I recoil from the bitterness of being nearer. Still, it must be thought of."

Towards the end of July, in spite of her reluctance when it came to the point, they found themselves in London, where rooms were secured at 26, Devonshire Street. There they found it difficult to lead the quiet life they wanted, with their sisters and a few old friends. They were celebrities, returning on a sort of triumphal visit to their home; and the literary world rushed to receive them with open arms. The letters from which I quote were written to Mrs. Martin during August and September. The latter had asked them to visit her at Colwall, her home, near the old Turkish palace at Hope End.

"I am not ungrateful after all, but I wanted to write a

long letter to you (having much to say), and even now it is hard in this confusion to write a short one. We have been overwhelmed with kindnesses, crushed with gifts, like the Roman lady ; and literally to drink through a cup of tea from beginning to end without an interruption from the door-bell, we have scarcely attained to since we came. For my part I refuse all dinner invitations except when our dear friend Mr. Kenyon ‘ imposes himself as an exception,’ in his own words. But even in keeping the resolution there are necessary fatigues ; and, do you know, I have not been well since our arrival in England. My first step ashore was into a puddle and a fog, and I began to cough before we reached London. The quality of the air does *not* agree with me, that’s evident. For nearly five years I have had no such cough nor difficulty of breathing, and my friends, who at first sight thought me looking well, must forbear all compliments for the future, I think, I get so much paler every day. . . .

“ In regard to Colwall, you are both, my very dear friends, the kindest that you can be. Ah, but dearest, dearest Mrs. Martin, you can *understand*, with the same kindness that you use to me in other things. There is only one event in my life which never loses its bitterness ; which comes back on me like a retreating wave, going and coming again, which was and *is my grief—I never had but one brother who loved and comprehended me.* And so there is just one thought which would be unbearable if I went into your neighbourhood ; and you won’t set it down, I am sure, as unpardonable weakness, much less as affectation, if I confess to you that *I never could bear it.* The past would be too strong for me. As to Hope End, it is nothing. I

have been happier in my own home since, than I was there and then. But Torquay has made the neighbourhood of Hope End impossible to me. I could not eat or sleep in that air. You will forgive me for the weakness, I am certain. You know a little, if not entirely, how we loved one another ; how I was first with *him*, and *he* with me ; while God knows that death and separation have no power over such love.

“ After all, we shall see you in Paris, if not in England. We pass this winter in Paris, in the hope of my being able to bear the climate, for indeed Italy is too far. And if the winter does not disagree with me too much we mean to take a house and settle in Paris, so as to be close to you all, and that will be a great joy to me. You will pass through Paris this autumn (won’t you ?) on your way to Pau, and I shall see you. I do long to see you and make you know my husband. . . .

“ So far from regretting my marriage, it has made the happiness and honour of my life, and every unkindness received from my own house makes me press nearer to the tenderest and noblest of human hearts, *proved* by the uninterrupted devotion of nearly five years. Husband, lover, nurse—not one of these, has Robert been to me, but all three together. I neither regret my marriage, therefore, nor the manner of it, because the manner of it was a necessity of the act. I thought so at the time, I think so now ; and I believe that the world in general will decide (if the world is to be really appealed to) that my opinion upon this subject (after five years) is worth more.

“ Dearest Mrs. Martin, do write to me. I keep my thoughts as far as I can from bitter things, and the

affectionateness of my dearest sisters is indeed much on the other side. Also, we are both giddy with the kind attentions pressed on us from every side, from some of the best in England. It's hard to think at all in such a confusion. We met Tennyson (the Laureate) by a chance in Paris, who insisted that we should take possession of his house and servants at Twickenham and use them as long as we liked to stay in England. Nothing could be more warmly kind, and we accepted the note in which he gave us the right of possession for the sake of the generous autograph, though we never intended in our own minds to act out the proposition. Since then, Mr. Arnould, the Chancery barrister, has begged us to go and live in his town house (we don't want houses, you see); Mrs. Fanny Kemble called on us and left us tickets for her Shakespeare reading (by the way, I was charmed with her *Hamlet*); Mr. Forster, of the *Examiner*, gave us a magnificent dinner at Thames Ditton in sight of the swans; and we breakfast on Saturday with Mr. Rogers. Then we have seen the Literary Guild actors at the Hanover Square rooms, and we have passed an evening with Carlyle (one of the great sights in England, to my mind). He is a very warm friend of Robert's, so that on every account I was delighted to see him face to face. I can't tell you what else we have done or not done. It's a great dazzling heap of things new and strange. Barry Cornwall (Mr. Procter) came to see us every day till business swept him out of town, and dear Mrs. Jameson left her Madonna for us in despite of the printers. Such kindness, on all sides. Ah, there's kindness in England after all. Yet I grew cold to the heart as I set foot on the ground of it, and wished myself away. Also, the sort of life is not

perhaps the best for me and the sort of climate is really the worst."

"Now let me tell you of Wimpole Street. Henry has been very kind in coming not infrequently ; he has a kind, good heart. Occy, too, I have seen three or four times, Alfred and Sette once. My dearest Arabel is, of course, here once if not twice a day, and for hours at a time, bringing me great joy always, and Henrietta's dear kindness in coming to London on purpose to see me, for a week, has left a perfume in my life. Both those beloved sisters have been, as ever, perfect to me. Arabel is vexed just now, and so am I, my brothers having fixed with papa to go out of town directly, and she caring more to stay where I am. . . .

"I have not written to papa since our arrival, through my fear of involving Arabel ; but as soon as they go to the country I shall *hopelessly* write. He is very well and in good spirits, thank God.

"We have spent two days at New Cross with my husband's father and sister, and she has been here constantly. Most affectionate they are to me, and the babe is taken into adoration by Mr. Browning."

At last her reconciliation with the brother who had been hardest on her was effected ; but at the same time the last hope of seeing her father again was killed.

"After Robert's letter to George had been sent three times to Wales and been returned twice, it reached him, and immediately upon its reaching him (to do George justice) he wrote a kind reply to apprise us that he would

be at our door the same evening. So the night before last he came, and we are all good friends, thank God. I tenderly love him and the rest, and must for ever deplore that such poor barriers as a pedantic pride can set up should have interposed between long and strong and holy affections for years. But it is past, and I have been very happy in being held in his arms again, and seen in his eyes that I was still something more to him than a stone thrown away. So, if you have thought severely of him, you and dear Mr. Martin, do not any longer. Preserve your friendship for him, my dearest friends, and let all this foolish mistaken past be well past and forgotten. I think him looking thin, though it does not strike them so in Wimpole Street, certainly.

“ For the rest, the pleasantness is not on every side. It seemed to me right, notwithstanding that dear Mr. Kenyon advised against it, to apprise my father of my being in England. I could not leave England without trying the possibility of his seeing me once, of his consenting to kiss my child once. So I wrote, and Robert wrote. A manly, true, straightforward letter his was, yet in some parts so touching to me and so generous and conciliating everywhere, that I could scarcely believe in the probability of its being read in vain. In reply he had a very violent and unsparing letter, with all the letters I had written to papa through these five years *sent back unopened, the seals unbroken*. What went most to my heart was that some of the seals were black with black-edged envelopes ; so that he might have thought my child or husband dead, yet never cared to solve the doubt by breaking the seal. He said he regretted to have been forced to keep them by him until now, through

his ignorance of where he should send them. So there's the end. I cannot, of course, write again. God takes it all into His own hands, and I wait."

Meanwhile the volume "*Casa Guidi Windows*" had been issued, and the public were invited to accept a book of mingled poetry and politics, of which the poetry, not being exactly either satirical or descriptive or reflective, but a blend of different methods and moods, appeared to belong to no recognized genus, while the politics, already three years old, were no longer fresh in English minds, if indeed they had ever taken much root there. The reception of the book was not likely to be very enthusiastic, nor did Mrs. Browning expect that it would.

By the end of September they had settled in Paris, at 138, Avenue des Champs-Elysées, for the winter which was to decide whether it was possible for Mrs. Browning to spend the cold months so far north. The result, on the whole, was to prove that the air of Italy was a necessity to her. They did indeed spend another winter in Paris four years later, and for a time they clung to the idea of settling there in preference to Florence; but this was finally abandoned.

Mrs. Browning at all times loved Paris, ever since that first memorable fortnight she had passed there after her marriage. The living charm of the place, the sense—of which the first hour in Paris is enough to make the English traveller conscious—that a quicker, lighter, easier spirit vibrates there than elsewhere; the sense of being freed from the dulness of existence and given a fresh start with a livelier, more flexible mind;—all this appealed strongly to Mrs. Browning, to whom, as I have indicated, the very

diverse charm of Italy was never the luxury that it is to so many people. She loved an atmosphere of movement and intelligence far more than she loved an atmosphere of ancient and haunted dreams. Just as we saw that the music-barges and the airy coffee-drinking in the Piazza of St. Mark were an integral part of the charm of Venice for her, so at Paris we find her rejoicing—her, the former anchorite of silent seclusion!—in the restless life of restaurants, “mixing up one’s dinner with heaps of newspapers,” in the variegated shops, in the general chatter and stir of a place where the art of existence was so finely cultivated. It is true that during the winter she was little able to taste this aspect of the charm of Paris. The cold months kept her hardly less a prisoner than they once had in London. But if she could not enjoy the movement of Paris she luxuriated in its intelligence—in the opportunities of intercourse with the most distinguished literary circle in Europe.

Moreover, to be in Paris in the autumn of 1851 was to watch a more thrilling march of affairs than the wayward intrigues and miniature revolutions which had so disappointed her at Florence. The struggle between Louis Napoleon and the Legislative Assembly was steadily reaching its height, and to Mrs. Browning, with her love of France and her profound belief in the purity and loftiness of the national ideals, the figure of the Prince President gradually became an embodiment of all that was best and noblest in the national spirit. If the shock of the *coup d'état* caused her any misgiving, her faith in Napoleon was very soon enough to carry her with him. It is disappointing to see the complete failure of judicial impartiality which marks her

attitude towards him. The whole strength of casuistry is set to work to explain and defend his actions, one after another ; starting with the assumption that everything he does is right, she naturally is never at a loss for means of vindicating him. As yet, however, he had not become the more than mortal hero which his subsequent dealings with Italy made him in her eyes.

The following extracts are from letters written in Paris during this winter. The first is dated October 22, 1851, the last May 9, 1852 :—

“ The pause in writing has come from the confusion in living, my ever dearest Miss Mitford, and no worse cause. It was a long while before we could settle ourselves in a private apartment, and we had to stay at the hotel and wander about like doves turned out of the dove-cote, and seeking where to inhabit. . . . We have seen nothing in Paris, except the shell of it, yet. No theatres—nothing but business. Yet two evenings ago we hazarded going to a ‘ reception ’ at Lady Elgin’s, in the Faubourg St. Germain, and saw some French, but nobody of distinction. It is a good house, I believe, and she has an earnest face which must mean something. We were invited, and *are* invited to go every Monday, and that Monday in particular, between eight and twelve. You go in a morning dress, and there is tea. Nothing can be more *sans façon*, and my tremors (for, do you know, I was quite nervous on the occasion, and charged Robert to keep close to me) were perfectly unjustified by the event. You see it was an untried form of society—like trying a Turkish bath. I expected to see Balzac’s duchesses and *hommes de lettres* on

all sides of me, but there was nothing very noticeable, I think, though we found it agreeable enough. We go on Friday evening to a Madame Mohl's, where we are to have some of the 'celebrities,' I believe, for she seems to know everybody of all colours, from white to red. Then Mazzini is to give us a letter to George Sand—come what will, we must have a letter to George Sand—and Robert has one to Emile Lorquet of *The National* and Gavarni of the *Charivari*, so that we shall manage to thrust our heads into this atmosphere of Parisian journalism, and learn by experience how it smells. I hear that George Sand is seldom at Paris now. She has devoted herself to play-writing, and employs a houseful of men, her son's friends and her own, in acting privately with her what she writes—trying it on a home stage before she tries it at Paris. Her son is a very ordinary young man of three-and-twenty, but she is fond of him. . . ."

And again to Miss Mitford—

"Do write to me and tell me of your house, whether you are settling down in it comfortably. In every new house there's a good deal of bird's work in treading and shuffling down the loose sticks and straws, before one can feel it is to be a nest. Robert laughs at me sometimes for pushing about the chairs and tables in a sort of distracted way, but it's the very instinct of making a sympathetical home, that works in me. We were miserably off in London. I couldn't tuck myself in anyhow. And we enjoy in proportion these luxurious armchairs, so good for the Lollards.

"People say that the troops which pass before our windows every few days through the 'Arc de l'Étoile' to be

reviewed will bring the President back with them as 'emperor' some sunny morning not far off. As to waiting till *May*, nobody expects it. There is a great inward agitation, but the surface of things is smooth enough. Be constant, be constant! Constancy is a rare virtue even where it is not an undeniable piece of wisdom. Vive Napoleon II.!"

The following is dated December 10, eight days after the *coup d'état*—

"We have suffered neither fear nor danger—and I would not have missed the grand spectacle of the second of December for anything in the world—scarcely, I say, for the sight of the Alps.

"On the only day in which there was much fighting (Thursday), Wiedeman was taken out to walk as usual, under the precaution of keeping in the immediate neighbourhood of this house. This will prove to you how little we have feared for ourselves.

"But the natural emotion of the situation one could not escape from, and on Thursday night I sate up in my dressing gown till nearly one, listening to the distant firing from the boulevards. Thursday was the only day in which there was fighting of any serious kind. There has been *no resistance* on the part of the real people—nothing but sympathy for the President, I *believe*, if you except the natural mortification and disappointment of baffled parties. To judge from our own tradespeople: 'il a bien fait! c'est le vrai neveu de son oncle!' such phrases rung on every tone expressed the prevailing sentiment.

"For my own part I have not only more hope in the

situation but more faith in the French people than is ordinary among the English, who really try to exceed one another in discoloration and distortion of the circumstances. The government was in a deadlock—what was to be done? Yes, all parties cried out, ‘What was to be done?’ and felt that we were waist deep a fortnight ago in a state of crisis. In throwing back the sovereignty from a ‘representative assembly’ which had virtually ceased to represent, into the hands of the people, I think that Louis Napoleon did well. The talk about ‘military despotism’ is absolute nonsense. The French army is eminently civic, and nations who take their ideas from the very opposite fact of a *standing army* are far from understanding how absolutely a French soldier and French citizen are the same thing. The independence of the elections seems to be put out of reach of injury; and intelligent men of adverse opinions to the government think that the majority will be large in its favour. Such a majority would certainly justify Louis Napoleon, or *should*—even with you in England.”

The next passage is from a letter of December 11 to Mrs. Martin—

“For my part, I am too good a democrat to be afraid of being thrown back upon the primitive popular element, from impossible paper constitutions and unrepresenting representative assemblies. The situation was in a deadlock, and all the conflicting parties were full of dangerous hope of taking advantage of it; and I don’t see, for my part, what better could be done for the French nation than to sweep the board clear and bid them begin again. With no sort of prejudice in favour of Louis Napoleon (except, I

confess to you, some artistical admiration for the consummate ability and courage shown in his *coup d'état*), with no particular faith in the purity of his patriotism, I yet hold him justified *so far*, that is, I hold that a pure patriot would be perfectly justifiable in taking the same steps which up to this moment he has taken. He has broken, certainly, the husk of an oath, but fidelity to the intention of it seems to me reconcilable with the breach ; and if he had not felt that he had the great mass of the people to back him, he is at least too able a man, be certain, if not too honest a man, to have dared what he has dared. You will see the result of the elections. As to Paris, don't believe that Paris suffers violence from Louis Napoleon. The result of my own impressions is a conviction that *from the beginning* he had the sympathy of the whole population here with him, to speak generally, and exclusively of particular parties."

The person whom of all others Mrs. Browning most desired to see at Paris was George Sand. Mazzini had given them a letter of introduction to her ; but her appearances were rare and fitful, and the first opportunity was missed. Mrs. Browning writes on Christmas Eve—

" Ah, I am so vexed about George Sand. She came, she has gone, and we haven't met ! There was a M. François who pretended to be her very very particular friend, and who managed the business so particularly ill, from some motive or some incapacity, that he did not give us an opportunity of presenting our letter. He did not '*dare*' to present it for us, he said. She is shy—she distrusts book-making strangers, and she intended to be

incognita while in Paris. He proposed that we should leave it at the theatre, and Robert refused. Robert said he wouldn't have our letter mixed up with the love letters of the actresses, or perhaps given to the 'premier comique' to read aloud in the green room, as a relief to the 'Chère adorable,' which had produced so much laughter. Robert was a little proud and M. François very stupid; and I, between the two, in a furious state of dissent from either. Robert tries to smooth down my ruffled plumage now, by promising to look out for some other opportunity, but the late one has gone. She is said to have appeared in Paris in a bloom of recovered beauty and brilliancy of eyes, and the success of her play, *Le Mariage de Victorine*, was complete. A strange, wild, wonderful woman, certainly. While she was here, she used a bedroom which belongs to her son—a mere 'chambre de garçon'—and for the rest, saw whatever friends she chose to see only at the 'café,' where she breakfasted and dined. She has just finished a romance, we hear, and took fifty-two nights to write it. She writes only at night. People call her Madame Sand. There seems to be no other name for her in society or letters."

Early in 1852 she suffered a shock, the severity of which shows how little the new freedom and brightness of her life had healed the wound caused nearly fifteen years before by the bitter tragedy of her brother Edward's death at Torquay. Miss Mitford had just published her "Recollections of a Literary Life," in which, in a chapter dealing with the Brownings, she touched with all delicacy on that sad episode. Knowing, as she must have known, her friend's profound sensitiveness on the subject, she was certainly

guilty of lack of consideration ; yet with her sound matter-of-fact mind it was no doubt hard for her to realize that the long years that had passed since then had done nothing to cicatrize the scar. Mrs. Browning knew that she was to be included in the book, and the year before had implored Miss Mitford to leave her early literary work in silence and oblivion. But it had not occurred to her that the veil would be torn off the great catastrophe of her life, and when the news of it came, she positively reeled under the blow. She writes to Miss Mitford—

“ My very dear friend, let me begin what I have to say by recognizing you as the most generous and affectionate of friends. I never could mistake the least of your intentions ; you were always, from first to last, kind and tenderly indulgent to me—always exaggerating what was good in me, always forgetting what was faulty and weak—keeping me by force of affection in a higher place than I could aspire to by force of vanity ; loving me always, in fact. Now let me tell you the truth. It will prove how hard it is for the tenderest friends to help paining one another, since *you* have pained *me*. See what a deep wound I must have in me, to be pained by the touch of such a hand. Oh, I am morbid, I very well know. But the truth is that I have been miserably upset by your book, and that if I had had the least imagination of your intending to touch upon certain biographical details in relation to me, I would have conjured you by your love to me and by my love to you, to forbear it altogether. You cannot understand ; no, you cannot understand with all your wide sympathy (perhaps, because *you* are not morbid, and I am), the sort of

susceptibility I have upon one subject. I have lived heart to heart (for instance) with my husband these five years : I have never yet spoken out, in a whisper even, what is in me ; never yet could find heart or breath ; never yet could bear to hear a word of reference from his lips. And now those dreadful words are going the round of the newspapers, to be verified here, commented on there, gossiped about everywhere ; and I, for my part, am frightened to look at a paper as a child in the dark—as unreasonably, you will say—but what then ? what drives us mad is our unreason. I will tell you how it was. First of all, an English acquaintance here told us that she had been hearing a lecture at the Collège de France, and that the professor, M. Philaret Chasles, in the introduction to a series of lectures on English poetry, had expressed his intention of noticing Tennyson, Browning, etc., and E. B. B.—‘from whose private life the veil had been raised in so interesting a manner lately by Miss Mitford.’ In the midst of my anxiety about this, up comes a writer of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* to my husband, to say that he was preparing a review upon me and had been directed by the editor to make use of some biographical details extracted from your book into the *Athenæum*, but that it had occurred to him doubtfully whether certain things might not be painful to me, and whether I might not prefer their being omitted in his paper. (All this time we had seen neither book nor *Athenæum*.) Robert answered for me that the omission of such and such things would be much preferred by me, and accordingly the article appears in the *Revue* with the passage from your book garbled and curtailed as seemed best to the quoter. Then Robert set about procuring the *Athenæum* in question.

He tells me (and *that* I perfectly believe) that, for the facts to be given at all, they could not possibly be given with greater delicacy ; oh, and I will add for myself, that for them to be related by anyone during my life, I would rather have *you* to relate them than another. But why should they be related during my life ? There was no need, no need. To show my nervous susceptibility in the length and breadth of it to you, I *could not* (when it came to the point) *bear to read* the passage extracted in the *Athenaeum*, notwithstanding my natural anxiety to see exactly what was done. I could not bear to do it. I made Robert read it aloud—with omissions—so that I know all your kindness. I feel it deeply ; through tears of pain I feel it ; and if, as I dare say you will, you think me very very foolish, do not on that account think me ungrateful. Ungrateful I never can be to you, my much loved and kindest friend.

“I hear your book is considered one of your best productions, and I do not doubt that the opinion is just. Thank you for giving it to us, thank you.”

And again, a few days later, when Miss Mitford had written to say that she had rather that the whole book had perished than have given a moment’s pain—

“Thank you, thank you, my beloved friend. Yes ; I do understand in my heart all your kindness. Yes, I do believe that on some points I am full of disease ; and this has exposed me several times to shocks of pain in the ordinary intercourse of the world, which for bystanders were hard, I dare say, to make out. Once at the Baths of Lucca I was literally nearly struck down to the ground

by a single word said in all kindness by a friend whom I had not seen for ten years. The blue sky reeled over me, and I caught at something, not to fall. Well, there is no use dwelling on this subject. I understand your affectionateness and tender consideration, I repeat, and thank you ; and love you, which is better. Now, let us talk of reasonable things."

A happy acquaintance was begun during this winter with M. Joseph Milsand. That accomplished critic became a true friend of both. He was the only man, said Browning, who wrote of his poems with understanding.

At last their letter to George Sand reached its destination. Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford—

" Meanwhile, we have at last sent our letter (Mazzini's) to George Sand, accompanied with a little note signed by both of us, though written by me, as seemed right, being the woman. We half despaired in doing this, for it is most difficult, it appears, to get at her, she having taken vows against seeing strangers in consequence of various annoyances and persecutions in and out of print, which it's the mere instinct of a woman to avoid. I can understand it perfectly. Also, she is in Paris for only a few days, and under a new name, to escape from the plague of her notoriety. People say to us : ' She will never see you ; you have no chance, I am afraid.' But we determined to try. At last I pricked Robert up to the leap, for he was really inclined to sit in his chair and be proud a little. ' No,' said I, ' you *shan't* be proud, and I *won't* be proud, and we *will* see her. I *won't* die, if I can help it, without seeing George Sand.' So we gave our letter to a friend

who was to give it to a friend, who was to place it in her hands, her abode being a mystery and the name she used unknown. The next day came by the post the answer—

“‘Madame,—J’aurai l’honneur de vous recevoir dimanche prochain rue Racine 3. C’est le seul jour que je puisse passer chez moi, et encore je n’en suis pas absolument certaine. Mais j’y ferai tellement mon possible, que ma bonne étoile m’y aidera peut-être un peu.

“‘Agréez mille remercîments de cœur, ainsi que Monsieur Browning, que j’espère voir avec vous, pour la sympathie que vous m’accordez.

“‘GEORGE SAND.

“‘Paris : 12 février, 52.’

“This is graceful and kind, is it not? And we are going to-morrow; I, rather at the risk of my life.”

On February 15 she writes to Mr. Kenyon—

“Whom do you think I saw yesterday? George Sand. Oh, I have been in such fear about it! It’s the most difficult thing to get access to her, and, notwithstanding our letter from Mazzini, we were assured on all sides that she would not see us. She has been persecuted by bookmakers—run to ground by the race, and, after having quite lost her on her former visit to Paris, it was in half despair that we seized on an opportunity of committing our letter of introduction to a friend of a friend of hers, who promised to put it into her own hands. With the letter I wrote a little note—I writing, as I was the woman, and both of us signing it. To my delight, we had an answer by the next

day's post, gracious and graceful, desiring us to call on her last Sunday.

"So we went. Robert let me at last, though I had a struggle for even that, the air being rather over-sharp for me. But I represented to him that one might as well lose one's life as one's peace of mind for ever, and if I lost seeing her I should with difficulty get over it. So I put on my respirator, smothered myself with furs, and, in a close carriage, did not run much risk after all.

"She received us very kindly, with hand stretched out, which I, with a natural emotion (I assure you my heart beat), stooped and kissed, when she said quickly, 'Mais non, je ne veux pas,' and kissed my lips. She is somewhat large for her height—not tall—and was dressed with great nicety in a sort of grey serge gown and jacket, made after the ruling fashion just now, and fastened up to the throat, plain linen collarette and sleeves. Her hair was uncovered, divided on the forehead in black, glossy bandeaux, and twisted up behind. The eyes and brow are noble, and the nose is of a somewhat Jewish character; the chin a little recedes, and the mouth is not good, though mobile, flashing out a sudden smile with its white projecting teeth. There is no sweetness in the face, but great moral as well as intellectual capacities—only it never *could* have been a beautiful face, which a good deal surprised me. The chief difference in it since it was younger is probably that the cheeks are considerably fuller than they used to be, but this of course does not alter the type. Her complexion is of a deep olive. I observed that her hands were small and well-shaped. We sate with her perhaps three-quarters of an hour or more—in which time she gave advice and various

directions to two or three young men who were there, showing her confidence in us by the freest use of names and allusion to facts. She seemed to be, in fact, *the man* in that company, and the profound respect with which she was listened to a good deal impressed me. You are aware from the newspapers that she came to Paris for the purpose of seeing the President in behalf of certain of her friends, and that it was a successful mediation. What is peculiar in her manners and conversation is the absolute simplicity of both. Her voice is low and rapid, without emphasis or variety of modulation. Except one brilliant smile, she was grave—indeed, she was speaking of grave matters, and many of her friends are in adversity. But you could not help seeing (both Robert and I saw it) that in all she said, even in her kindness and pity, there was an under-current of scorn. A scorn of pleasing she evidently had ; there never could have been a colour of coquetry in that woman. Her very freedom from affectation and consciousness had a touch of disdain. But I liked her. I did not love her, but I felt the burning soul through all that quietness, and was not disappointed in George Sand. When we rose to go I could not help saying, "C'est pour la dernière fois," and then she asked us to repeat our visit next Sunday, and excused herself from coming to see us on the ground of a great press of engagements. She kissed me again when we went away, and Robert kissed her hand."

Afterwards they saw more of her. Mrs. Browning writes on April 7 to Miss Mitford—

"George Sand we came to know a great deal more of. I think Robert saw her six times. Once he met her

near the Tuileries, offered her his arm, and walked with her the whole length of the gardens. She was not on that occasion looking as well as usual, being a little too much 'endimanchée' in terrestrial lavenders and super-celestial blues—not, in fact, dressed with the remarkable taste which he has seen in her at other times. Her usual costume is both pretty and quiet, and the fashionable waistcoat and jacket (which are a spectacle in all the 'Ladies' Companions' of the day) make the only approach to masculine *wearings* to be observed in her. She has great nicety and refinement in her personal ways, I think, and the cigarette is really a feminine weapon if properly understood. Ah, but I didn't see her smoke. I was unfortunate. I could only go with Robert three times to her house, and once she was out. He was really very good and kind to let me go at all, after he found the sort of society rampant around her. He didn't like it extremely, but, being the prince of husbands, he was lenient to my desires and yielded the point. She seems to live in the abomination of desolation, as far as regards society—crowds of ill-bred men who adore her *à genoux bas*, betwixt a puff of smoke and an ejection of saliva. Society of the ragged Red diluted with the lower theatrical. She herself so different, so apart, as alone in her melancholy disdain! I was deeply interested in that poor woman, I felt a profound compassion for her. I did not mind much the Greek in Greek costume who tutoyéd her, and kissed her, I believe, so Robert said; or the other vulgar man of the theatre who went down on his knees and called her 'sublime.' 'Caprice d'amitié,' said she, with her quiet, gentle scorn. A noble woman under the mud, be certain. *I* would kneel

down to her, too, if she would leave it all, throw it off, and be herself as God made her. But she would not care for my kneeling ; she does not care for me. Perhaps she doesn't care for anybody by this time—who knows ? She wrote one or two, or three kind notes to me, and promised to ‘venir m'embrasser’ before she left Paris ; but she did not come. We both tried hard to please her, and she told a friend of ours that she ‘liked us ;’ only we always felt that we couldn't penetrate—couldn't really *touch* her—it was all vain. Her play failed, though full of talent. It didn't draw, and was withdrawn accordingly. I wish she would keep to her romances, in which her real power lies.”

One more extract shall complete the tale for this sojourn at Paris—

“ No, there is a brochure, or a little book somewhere, pretending to be a memoir of Balzac, but I have not seen it. Some time before his death he had bought a country place, and there was a fruit tree in the garden—I think a walnut tree—about which he delighted himself in making various financial calculations after the manner of César Birotteau. He built the house himself, and when it was finished there was just one defect—it wanted a staircase. They had to put in the staircase afterwards. The picture gallery, however, had been seen to from the first, and the great writer had chalked on the walls, ‘Mon Raffaelle,’ ‘Mon Corrège,’ ‘Mon Titien,’ ‘Mon Léonard de Vinci,’ the pictures being yet unattained. He is said to have been a little loth to spend money, and to have liked to dine magnificently at the restaurant at the expense of his friends, forgetting to pay for his own share of the entertainment.

For the rest, the ‘*idée fixe*’ of the man was to be rich one day, and he threw his subtle imagination and vital poetry into pounds, shillings, and pence with such force that he worked the base element into spiritual splendours. Oh! to think of our having missed seeing that man. It is painful. A little book is published of his ‘thoughts and maxims,’ the sweepings of his desk I suppose; broken notes, probably, which would have been wrought up into some noble works, if he had lived. Some of these are very striking.”

Towards the end of June they left Paris for a second visit to London. This time they established themselves for four months at 58, Welbeck Street, in the neighbourhood of her old home, so that Arabel Barrett was close at hand; moreover the other sister, Henrietta, now Mrs. Surtees Cook, was in London, only “some twenty doors away.” A few interesting pages from her letters will show the enthusiastic reception that the literary world gave them once more. They were disappointed, however of seeing Miss Mitford; so the last opportunity of wiping out the memory of her indiscretions by a personal meeting went by, for she died before their next return to England.

“Dear Mr. Kenyon has not yet gone to Scotland, though his intentions still stand north. He passed an evening with us some evenings ago, and was brilliant and charming (the two things together), and good and affectionate at the same time. Mr. Landor was staying with him (perhaps I told you that), and went away into Worcestershire, assuring me, when he took leave of me, that

he would never enter London again. A week passes, and lo ! Mr. Kenyon expects him again. Resolutions are not always irrevocable, you observe.

"I must tell you what Landor said about Louis Napoleon. You are aware that he loathed the first Napoleon and that he hates the French nation ; also, he detests the present state of French affairs, and has foamed over in the *Examiner* 'in prose and rhyme' on the subject of them. Nevertheless, he who calls 'the Emperor' 'an infernal fool' expresses himself to this effect about the President : 'I always knew him to be a man of wonderful genius. I knew him intimately, and I was persuaded of what was in him. When people have said to me, "How can you like to waste your time on so trifling a man ?" I have answered : "If all your Houses of Parliament, putting their heads together, could make a head equal to this trifling man's head, it would be well for England.'"

"It was quite unexpected to me to hear Mr. Landor talk so.

"He, Mr. Landor, is looking as young as ever, as full of life and passionate energy.

"Did Mr. Horne write to you before he went to Australia ? Did I speak to you about his going ? Did you see the letter which he put into the papers as a farewell to England ? I think of it all sadly.

"Mazzini came to see us the other day, with that pale spiritual face of his, and those intense eyes full of melancholy illusions. I was thinking, while he sate there, on what Italian turf he would lie at last with a bullet in his heart, or perhaps with a knife in his back, for to one of those ends it will surely come. Mrs. Carlyle came

with him. She is a great favourite of mine : full of thought, and feeling, and character, it seems to me.

“ London is emptying itself, and the relief will be great in a certain way ; for one gets exhausted sometimes. Let me remember whom I have seen. Mrs. Newton Crosland, who spoke of you very warmly ; Miss Mulock, who wrote ‘The Ogilvies’ (that series of novels), and is interesting, gentle, and young, and seems to have worked half her life in spite of youth ; Mr. Field we have not seen, only heard of ; Miss ——, no—but I am to see her, I understand, and that she is an American Corinna in yellow silk, but pretty. We drove out to Kensington with Monckton Milnes and his wife, and I like her ; she is quiet and kind, and seems to have accomplishments, and we are to meet Fanny Kemble at the Procters’ some day next week. Many good faces, but the best wanting. Ah, I wish Lord Stanhope, who shows the spirits of the sun in a crystal ball, could show us *that!* Have you heard of the crystal ball ? We went to meet it and the seer the other morning, with sundry of the believers and unbelievers—among the latter, chief among the latter, Mr. Chorley, who was highly indignant and greatly scandalized, particularly on account of the combination sought to be established by the lady of the house between lobster salad and Oremus, spirit of the sun. For my part, I endured both luncheon and spiritual phenomena with great equanimity. It was very curious altogether to my mind, as a sign of the times, if in no other respect of philosophy. But I love the marvellous.”

“ We have had no less than eight invitations into the country, and we are forced to keep to London, in spite

of all ‘babbling about’ and from ‘green fields.’ Once we went to Farnham, and spent two days with Mr. and Mrs. Paine there in that lovely heathy country, and met Mr. Kingsley, the ‘Christian Socialist,’ author of ‘Alton Locke,’ ‘Yeast,’ etc. It is only two hours from town (or less) by railroad, and we took our child with us and Flush, and had a breath of fresh air which ought to have done us good, but didn’t. Few men have impressed me more agreeably than Mr. Kingsley. He is original and earnest, and full of a genial and almost tender kindness which is delightful to me. Wild and theoretical in many ways he is, of course, but I believe he could not be otherwise than good and noble, let him say or dream what he will. You are not to confound this visit of ours to Farnham with the ‘sanitary reform’ picnic (!) to the same place, at which the newspapers say we were present. We were *invited*—that is true—but did not go, nor thought of it. I am not up to picnics—not *down* to some of the company perhaps; who knows? Don’t think me grown, too, suddenly scornful, without being sure of the particulars. . . .

“Mr. Tennyson has a little son, and wrote me three such happy notes on the occasion that I really never liked him so well before. I do like men who are not ashamed to be happy beside a cradle. Monckton Milnes had a brilliant christening luncheon, and his baby was made to sweep in India muslin and Brussels lace among a very large circle of admiring guests. Think of my vanity turning my head completely and admitting of my taking Wiedeman there (because of an express invitation). He behaved like an angel, everybody said, and looked very pretty, I said myself; only he disgraced us all at last by

refusing to kiss the baby, on the ground of his being ‘troppo grande.’ He has learnt quantities of English words, and is in consequence more unintelligible than ever. Poor darling! I am in pain about him to-day. Wilson goes to spend a fortnight with her mother, and I don’t know how I shall be comforter enough. There will be great wailing and gnashing of teeth certainly, and I shall be in prison for the next two weeks, and have to do all the washing and dressing myself. . . .”

“Mr. Ruskin has been to see us (did I tell you that?) . . . We went to Denmark Hill yesterday by agreement, to see the Turners—which, by the way, are divine. I like Mr. Ruskin much, and so does Robert. Very gentle, yet earnest—refined and truthful. I like him very much. We count him among the valuable acquaintances made this year in England. . . .”

Early in November, 1852, they left London, and after a few days in Paris, returned to Florence by the Mont Cenis route. They had been away from Casa Guidi for a year and a half, and they now had the delightful sensation of returning to their real home. Florence was, after all, the place where they had struck the deepest root; their child had been born there, they had made a fairly wide circle of friends, they had gathered possessions of their own round them. Moreover, after the unusual excitements of her Parisian winter and her two London summers, Mrs. Browning sank for a time with some relief into the quiet round of their old life.

“Of course it *is* very dead in comparison,” she writes,

contrasting Florence with Paris, “but it’s a beautiful death, and what with the lovely climate, and the lovely associations, and the sense of repose, I could turn myself on my pillow and sleep on here to the end of my life ; only be sure that *I shall do no such thing.*”

With her restless soul she certainly had it not in her to do any such thing ; besides, she could not yet reconcile herself to the idea of living permanently so far out of reach of England ; even if she had to spend the winter months always in Italy, she wished their headquarters to be in Paris, where it seemed likely that Browning’s father and sister would settle themselves.

They meant to go to Rome for the winter if they could let the Casa Guidi apartment ; but they did not succeed in this, and eventually they stayed in Florence till late in the following summer. We hear of two new friends during these months, both of whom are of interest to us. The first was Frederick Tennyson, elder brother of Alfred, a strange gifted man, full of much fine and haunting poetry, who was now living in Florence with an Italian wife and a family of small children. He was greatly occupied in Swedenborgianism, with the accompaniments of spirit-trapping and table-turning which carried away, during those years, so many poorer minds than his and Mrs. Browning’s. The other new friend was Robert Lytton, the “Owen Meredith” of poetic fame, at this time attached to the English Legation at Florence—very young, very cultivated, very agreeable, and, like Tennyson, ready to join Mrs. Browning in her search for news from the unseen world. These two new friends made an addition to their circle that

they much valued. She writes during this winter to Miss Isa Blagden—

“We linger at Florence in spite of all. It was delightful to find ourselves in the old nest, still warm, of Casa Guidi, to sit in our own chairs and sleep in our own beds ; and here we shall stay as late perhaps as March, if we don’t re-let our house before. Then we go to Rome and Naples. You can’t think how we have caught up our ancient traditions just where we left them, and relapsed into our former soundless, stirless hermit life. Robert has not passed an evening from home since we came—just as if we had never known Paris. People come sometimes to have tea and talk with us, but that’s all ; a few intelligent and interesting persons sometimes, such as Mr. Tennyson (the poet’s brother) and Mr. Lytton (the novelist’s son) and Mr. Stuart, the lecturer on Shakespeare, whom once I named to you, I fancy. Mr. Tennyson married an Italian, and has four children. He has much of the atmosphere poetic about him, a dreamy, speculative, shy man, reminding us of his brother in certain respects ; good and pure-minded. I like him. Young Mr. Lytton is very young, as you may suppose, with all sorts of high aspirations—and visionary enough to suit *me*, which is saying much—and affectionate, with an apparent liking to us both, which is engaging to us, of course.”

It will be remembered that long years before, in London, Mrs. Browning had been half enthralled, half terrified by a sensation that had then flown from mouth to mouth—the reports of the extraordinary phenomena of mesmerism, most conspicuously exemplified in the case of Miss Martineau.

Breathlessly as she had hung on these reports, there had been nothing in the least hysterical in her attitude. She had been drawn towards them almost against her will, not without scepticism, prepared to treat the evidence judicially. Now, fifteen years later, a new tale of mystery swept forward—no discovery, like mesmerism, of unsuspected powers of the mind, but rather a betrayal of the mind's weakest places, of its credulity, its helplessness when faced with strange things, its eagerness to accept a sensational explanation without waiting for a normal one. I do not here imply that the spiritualism of fifty years ago had its roots in nothing but fraud and superstition. I would only say that people who were no psychologists, who had little or no conception of the scientific spirit, were not in a position to assign an explanation at all. Mrs. Browning showed herself, after all, to be one of these. She simply prostrated her mind, once so shrewd and balanced, before the whole subject of spiritualism. It passed straight into her life, not through intellect, but through emotion; and the melancholy part of it is that by this time her hold over emotion had indefinitely relaxed. What had before been a fine, fearless enthusiasm, anchored in sense and reason, now crossed the verge of hysteria and became an unrestrained overflow of feeling, pathetic and distressing to watch. It makes no difference whether we think the object on which she lavished herself was a futile one, or whether we believe, as she did, that from that direction a chink of light did indeed penetrate from the life beyond the grave. Granted that it was futile, it is still a poor thing to be incapable of a single burst of misdirected enthusiasm. The painful part about Mrs. Browning's excitement is not that its cause was

insufficient, but that it had the taint of feverish exaggeration ; its force was due, not merely to the strength of her feelings, but to a lack of control over them ; and we almost seem, in listening to her outpourings on this subject, to be taking an undue advantage of her pure and beautiful spirit.

Browning, as is well known, was far from sharing this torrent of emotion ; indeed, it used to be said that this subject gave rise to his one serious difference with his wife. That was certainly not the case ; the matter never in the least degree blurred the harmony of their lives. But it is impossible to think that he can have watched his wife's overstrained eagerness without a certain degree of pain—not because of the diversity of their views, but simply because under this fierce stimulus she was gradually sacrificing her peace and strength.

This was the subject that most occupied her during the winter of 1852-3. "You know I am rather a visionary," she writes, "and inclined to knock round at all the doors of the present world to try to get out, so that I listen with interest to every goblin story of the kind, and, indeed, I hear enough of them just now." Frederick Tennyson and Lytton were always at hand for zealous discussion of every rumour of the unseen that floated their way ; a stream of English and American writers, on their way through Florence, added their contributions to the tale of wonder ; and Browning's scepticism only gave the believers a stronger hold upon their faith. They joined hands and supported one another in withstanding his distrust of mediums and crystal-gazers ; and when their own experiments were of doubtful success, they took refuge in the

irrefutable plea that it was the presence of an unsympathetic onlooker that made them so.

At the same time, however, this engrossing subject did not, fortunately enough, touch one side of Mrs. Browning's life. It was during these months that she began to work, at the very height of her powers, upon the "novel-poem"—a "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" upon a much more extended scale—which she had long looked forward to writing. In a letter to Mrs. Jameson, she says—

"The poem I am about will fill a volume when done. It is the novel or romance I have been hankering after so long, written in blank verse, in the autobiographical form; the heroine, an artist woman—not a painter, mind. It is intensely modern, crammed from the times (not the *Times* newspaper) as far as my strength will allow."

Browning appears also to have set to work on "Men and Women" during this winter; but they can neither of them have been working at great pressure, for the result was not seen until some time later.

The following extracts are from her letters of the spring. She writes in March, 1853, to Miss Blagden, of the momentous topic of the day :—

"Profane or not, I am resolved on getting as near to a solution of the spirit question as I can, and I don't believe in the least risk of profanity, seeing that whatever is, must be permitted; and that the contemplation of whatever is, must be permitted also, where the intentions are pure and reverent. I can discern no more danger in psychology than in mineralogy, only intensely a greater interest. As to the

spirits, I care less about what they are capable of communicating, than of the fact of there being communications. I certainly wouldn't set about building a system of theology out of their oracles. God forbid. They seem abundantly foolish, one must admit. There is probably, however, a mixture of good spirits and bad, foolish and wise, of the lower orders perhaps, in both kinds. . . .

“ Isa, you and I must try to make head against the strong-minded women, though really you half frighten me prospectively. . . .”

And again to Mr. Kenyon—

“ We tried the table experiment in this room a few days since, by-the-bye, and failed ; but we were impatient, and Robert was playing Mephistopheles, as Mr. Lytton said, and there was little chance of success under the circumstances. It has been done several times in Florence, and the fact of the possibility seems to have passed among ‘attested facts.’ There was a placard on the wall yesterday about a pamphlet purporting to be an account of these and similar phenomena ‘scoperte a Livorno,’ referring to ‘oggetti semoventi’ and other wonders. You can’t even look at a wall without a touch of the subject. The *circoli* at Florence are as revolutionary as ever, only tilting over tables instead of States, alas ! From the Legation to the English chemist’s, people are ‘serving tables’ (in spite of the Apostle) everywhere. When people gather round a table it isn’t to play whist. . . .”

“ Robert, who won’t believe, he says, till he sees and hears with his own senses—Robert, who is a sceptic—observed of himself the other day, that we had received as

much evidence of these spirits as of the existence of the town of Washington. But then of course he would add—and you would, reasonably enough—that in a matter of this kind (where you have to jump) you require more evidence, double the evidence, to what you require for the existence of Washington. That's true."

Mrs. Browning's other absorbing interest was for the moment in abeyance. Her political creed was now summed up in two articles—faith in Napoleon III. and bitter hatred of Austria. But at this time they no longer had the excitement of living in the middle of events, and we hear comparatively little of Italian affairs for the present.

The following is from a letter to Miss Mitford of February, 1853 :—

"I wonder if the Empress pleases you as well as the Emperor. For my part, I approve altogether, and none the less that he has offended Austria by the mode of announcement. Every cut of the whip in the face of Austria is an especial compliment to me—or, *so I feel it*. Let him head the democracy and do his duty to the world, and use to the utmost his great opportunities. Mr. Cobden and the Peace Society are pleasing me infinitely just now in making head against the immorality (that's the word) of the English press. The tone taken up towards France is immoral in the highest degree, and the invasion cry would be idiotic if it were not something worse. The Empress, I heard the other day from good authority, is 'charming and good at heart.' She was educated 'at a respectable school at Bristol' (Miss Rogers's, Royal Crescent, Clifton), and is very 'English,'

which doesn't prevent her from shooting with pistols, leaping gates, driving 'four-in-hand,' and upsetting the carriage when the frolic requires it, as brave as a lion and as true as a dog. Her complexion is like marble, white, pale and pure; her hair light, rather 'sandy,' they say, and she powders it with gold dust for effect; but there is less physical and more intellectual beauty than is generally attributed to her. She is a woman of 'very decided opinions.' I like all that, don't you? and I liked her letter to the Préfet, as everybody must."

Three months later she writes to Mrs. Martin—

"Your politics would be my politics on most points; we should run together more than halfway, if we could stand side by side, in spite of all your vindictiveness to N. III. My hero—say you? Well, I have more belief in him than you have. And what is curious, and would be unaccountable, I suppose, to English politicians in general, the Italian democrats of the lowest classes, the popular clubs in Florence, are clinging to him as their one hope. Ah, here's oppression! here's a people trodden down! You should come here and see. It is enough to turn the depths of the heart bitter. The will of the people forced, their instinctive affections despised, their liberty of thought spied into, their national life ignored altogether. Robert keeps saying, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Such things cannot last, surely. Oh, this brutal Austria!"

"I myself expect help from Louis Napoleon, though scarcely in the way that the clubs are said to do. When I talk of a club, of course I mean a secret combination of men—young men who meet to read forbidden newspapers

and talk forbidden subjects. He won't help the Mazzinians, but he will do something for Italy, you will see. The Cardinals feel it, and that's why they won't let the Pope go to Paris. We shall see. I seem to catch sight of the grey of dawn even in the French Government papers, and am full of hope.

"As to Mazzini, he is a noble man and an unwise man. Unfortunately the epithets are compatible. Kossuth is neither very noble nor very wise. I have heard and *felt* a great deal of harm of him. The truth is not in him. And when a patriot lies like a Jesuit, what are we to say?"

The summer passed without event, and in July they decided to spend the *villeggiatura* once more at the Baths of Lucca. They took a villa for three months, rather larger than they needed, with a spare room which Robert Lytton was to occupy on a visit. From there she writes on July 26 to Miss Blagden—

"I deserve another scold for this other silence, dearest Isa. Scold as softly as you can! We have been in uncertainty about leaving Florence—where to go for the summer—and I did not like to write till I could tell you where to write to *me*. Now we are 'fixed,' as our American friends would say. We have taken this house for three months—a larger house than we need. We have a row of plane trees before the door in which the cicale sing all day, and the beautiful mountains stand close around, keeping us fresh with shadows. Penini thinks he is in Eden—at least *he doesn't think otherwise*. We have a garden and an arbour, and the fireflies light us up at nights. With all this, I am sorry for Florence. Florence was horribly hot, and pleasant

notwithstanding. We hated cutting the knot of friends we had there—bachelor friends, Isa, who came to us for coffee and smoking! I was gracious and permitted the cigar (as you were not present), and there were quantities of talk, controversy, and confidences evening after evening. One of our very favourite friends, Frederick Tennyson, is gone to England, or was to have gone, for three months. Mr. Lytton had a reception on the terrace of his villa at Bellosguardo the evening before our last in Florence, and we were all bachelors together there, and I made tea, and we ate strawberries and cream and talked spiritualism through one of the pleasantest two hours that I remember. Such a view! Florence dissolving in the purple of the hills; and the stars looking on. Mr. Tennyson was there, Mr. Powers, and M. Villari, an accomplished Sicilian, besides our young host and ourselves. How we ‘set down’ Faraday for his ‘arrogant and insolent letter,’ and what stories we told, and what miracles we swore to! Oh, we are believers here, Isa, except Robert, who persists in wearing a coat of respectable scepticism—so considered—though it is much out of elbows and ragged about the skirts. If I am right, you will none of you be able to disbelieve much longer—a new law, or a new development of law, is making way everywhere. We have heard much—more than I can tell you in a letter. Imposture is absolutely out of the question, to speak generally; and unless you explain the phenomena by ‘a personality unconsciously projected’ (which requires explanation of itself), you must admit the spirit theory. As to the simpler forms of the manifestation (it is all one manifestation), the ‘turning-tables,’ I was convinced long

before Faraday's letter that *many* of the amateur performances were from involuntary muscular action—but what then? These are only imitations of actual phenomena. Faraday's letter does not meet the common fact of tables being moved and lifted without the touch of a finger. It is a most arrogant letter and singularly inconclusive. Tell me any facts you may hear."

To her old friend Chorley of the *Athenæum*, she writes—

" We stayed in Florence till it was oven-heat, and then we came here, where it was fire-heat for a short time, though with cool nights comparatively, by means of which we lived, comparatively too. Now it is cool by day or night. You know these beautiful hills, the green rushing river which keeps them apart, the chestnut woods, the sheep-walks and goat-walks, the villages on the peaks of the mountains like wild eagles ; the fresh, unworn, uncivilized, world-before-the-flood look of everything ? If you don't know it, you ought to know it. Come and know it—do ! We have a spare bedroom which opens its door of itself at the thought of you, and if you can trust yourself so far from home, try for our sakes. Come and look in our faces and learn us more by heart, and see whether we are not two friends. I am so very sorry for your increased anxiety about your sister. I scarcely know how to cheer you, or, rather, to attempt such a thing, but it did strike me that she was full of life when I saw her. It may be better with her than your fears, after all. If you would come to us, you would be here in two hours from Leghorn ; and there's a telegraph at Leghorn—at Florence. Think of it, do. The Storys are at the top of the hill ; you know Mr. and

Mrs. Story. She and I go backward and forward on donkey-back to tea-drinking and gossiping at one another's houses, and our husbands hold the reins. Also Robert and I make excursions, he walking as slowly as he can to keep up with my donkey. When the donkey trots we are more equal. The other day we were walking, and I, attracted by a picturesque sort of ladder-bridge of loose planks thrown across the river, ventured on it, without thinking of venturing. Robert held my hand. When we were in the middle the bridge swayed, rocked backwards and forwards, and it was difficult for either of us to keep footing. A gallant colonel who was following us went down upon his hands and knees and crept. In the mean time a peasant was assuring our admiring friends that the river was deep at that spot, and that four persons had been lost from the bridge. I was so sick with fright that I could scarcely stand when all was over, never having contemplated an heroic act. 'Why, what a courageous creature you are!' said our friends. So reputations are made, Mr. Chorley.

"Yes, we are doing a little work, both of us. Robert is working at a volume of lyrics, of which I have seen but a few, and those seemed to me as fine as anything he has done. We neither of us show our work to one another till it is finished. An artist must, I fancy, either find or *make* a solitude to work in, if it is to be good work at all. This for the consolation of bachelors!"

The Storys referred to for the first time in this last letter were the accomplished American sculptor and writer, W. W. Story, and his wife, who soon became the intimate friends of the Brownings, and in later years joined them

more than once in their annual retreats into the country. These new friends had established their headquarters in Rome not long before, so the Brownings had an added pleasure in their plan of spending the ensuing winter there. Robert Lytton presently turned up at the Bagni di Lucca, to occupy the spare room ; and the following letter gives a picture, full of vivid charm, of these easy, happy, leisurely days—

" Since we have been here we have had for a visitor (drawing the advantage from our spare room) Mr. Lytton, Sir Edward's only son, who is *attaché* at the Florence Legation at this time. He lost nothing from the test of house-intimacy with either of us—gained, in fact, much. Full of all sorts of good and nobleness he really is, and gifted with high faculties and given to the highest aspirations—not vulgar ambitions, understand—he will never be a great diplomatist, nor fancy himself an inch taller for being master of Knebworth. Then he is somewhat dreamy and unpractical, we must confess ; he won't do for drawing carts under any sort of discipline. Such a summer we have enjoyed here, free from burning heats and mosquitos—the two drawbacks of Italy—and in the heart of the most enchanting scenery. Mountains not too grand for exquisite verdure, and just kept from touching by the silver finger of a stream. I have been donkey-riding, and so has Wiedeman. I even went (to prove to you how well I am) the great excursion to Prato Fiorito, six miles there and six miles back, perpendicularly up and down. Oh, it almost slew me of course ! I could not stir for days after. But who wouldn't see heaven and die ? Such a vision of divine

scenery, such as, in England, the best dreamers do not dream of ! As we came near home I said to Mr. Lytton, who was on horseback, ‘I am dying. How are you ?’ To which he answered, ‘I thought a quarter of an hour ago I could not keep up to the end, but now I feel better.’ This from a young man just one-and-twenty ! He is delicate, to be sure, but still you may imagine that the day’s work was not commonly fatiguing. The guides had to lead the horses and donkeys. It was like going up and down a wall, without the smoothness. No road except in the beds of torrents. Robert pretended to be not tired, but, of course (as sensible people say of the turning tables), nobody believed a word of it. It was altogether a supernatural pretension, and very impertinent in these enlightened days.

“Mr. and Mrs. Story were of our party. He is the son of Judge Story and full of all sorts of various talent. And she is one of those cultivated and graceful American women who take away the reproach of the national want of refinement. We have seen much of them throughout the summer. There has been a close communion of tea-drinking between the houses, and as we are all going to Rome together, this pleasure is not a past one. . . .”

In the autumn they returned for a few weeks to Casa Guidi, and by December they were settled in Rome for the winter, at No. 43, Via Bocca di Leone. A visit to Rome had long figured in their plans, but for different reasons had always dropped out of them till now. But Mrs. Browning’s first sight of the city was clouded by sorrow and anxiety. The day after their arrival Story’s eldest child died of gastric fever, and another, a girl, was

at the same time sent to the Brownings for shelter. Mrs. Browning was torn between her sympathy with the Storys and a panic of fear for the safety of her own child and husband. Though the girl did indeed sicken of the same fever, she recovered, and the Browning household escaped unhurt. But their friends' sorrow naturally dimmed the first brightness of seeing Rome. "Everything here has been slurred and blurred to us," she writes to Mrs. Jameson, "and distorted from the grand antique associations. I protest to you I doubt whether I shall get over it, and whether I ever shall feel that this is Rome." She continues presently—

"But we have seen Mrs. Kemble, and I am as enchanted as I ought to be, and even, perhaps, a little more. She has been very kind and gracious to me; she was to have spent an evening with us three days since, but something intervened. I am much impressed by her as well as attracted to her. What a voice, what eyes, what eyelids full of utterance !

"Then we have had various visits from Mr. Thackeray and his daughters. 'She writes to me of Thackeray instead of Raffael, and she is at Rome'! But she *isn't* at Rome. There's the sadness of it. We got to Gibson's studio, which is close by, and saw his coloured Venus. I don't like her. She has come out of her cloud of the ideal, and to my eyes is not too decent. Then in the long and slender throat, in the turn of it, and the setting on of the head, you have rather a grisette than a goddess. 'Tis over pretty and *petite*, the colour adding, of course, to this effect. Crawford's studio (the American sculptor) was far more interesting

to me than Gibson's. By the way, Mr. Page's portrait of Miss Cushman is really something wonderful—soul and body together. You can show nothing like it in England, take for granted. Indeed, the American artists consider themselves a little aggrieved when you call it as good as a Titian. "Did Titian ever produce anything like it?" said an admirer in my hearing. Critics wonder whether the colour will stand. It is a theory of this artist that time does not *tone*, and that Titian's pictures were painted as we see them. The consequence of which is that his (Page's) pictures are undertoned in the first instance, and if they change at all will turn black."

She writes a few weeks later to Miss Mitford—

"We see a good deal of the Kembles here, and like them both, especially the Fanny, who is looking magnificent still, with her black hair and radiant smile. A very noble creature, indeed. Somewhat unelastic, unpliant to the eye, attached to the old modes of thought and convention, but noble in quality and defects; I like her much. She thinks me credulous and full of dreams, but does not despise me for that reason, which is good and tolerant of her, and pleasant, too, for I should not be quite easy under her contempt. Mrs. Sartoris is genial and generous, her milk has had time to stand to cream, in her happy family relations. The Sartoris's house has the best society at Rome, and exquisite music, of course. We met Lockhart there, and my husband sees a good deal of him—more than I do, because of the access of cold weather lately which has kept me at home chiefly. Robert went down to the seaside in a day's excursion with him and the Sartoris's; and, I hear, found favour

in his sight. Said the critic : ‘I like Browning, he isn’t at all like a damned literary man.’ That’s a compliment, I believe, according to your dictionary. It made me laugh and think of you directly.”

These letters, and others that might be quoted, illustrate a point which has already been dwelt on. The special qualities that make Italy unique among all lands—the sense of history, of the crowded traditions of life and art, in which the whole landscape is steeped—did not really appeal, as we should have expected, to this vibrating, imaginative woman. Even in Rome, where these impressions are most concentrated, there is little or nothing to show that she responded to them. In her long letters, full of leisurely detail, she hardly mentions the new sights and scenes all around her—the stately old city, the soft desolation of the Campagna, the ancient austerity of town and country, so different from the graceful abundant Tuscan beauty with which she was familiar. As for art, it is not the art of the Vatican or the Capitol of which we hear ; it is the less remote creations of her friends’ studios, Story’s and Gibson’s and Page’s ; in a word, it is art approached from a social side. Rome was, in fact, to Mrs. Browning a centre of delightful and hospitable friends ; and in their society she spent a winter full of interest and pleasure. There was, first of all, the artistic group, largely American, to which the Brownings were introduced by Story : a group to whom art was an easier, ampler word than it has become after fifty years, conveying a serene enjoyment rather than a tortured straining after an ideal always just out of reach. If they have vanished now, if

Gibson's wonderful inspiration that painting and sculpture should be wedded for ever in a coloured statue has faded as completely as Page's Titianesque effects (the like of which Titian certainly never *did* produce)—if their art has gone, their genial memory survives in many records, and not least in Mrs. Browning's letters. Then, too, besides this special group, there were other new friends whose names are more familiar: the great and gracious Fanny Kemble and her milder sister, Mrs. Sartoris; Lockhart, who was travelling with the Duke of Wellington, and was in such an advanced state of age and decay that the Duke was much occupied in considering how he should manage his funeral in a foreign country—would it be delicate to ask Lockhart whether he preferred that his body should be sent to England or buried in Italy?—Thackeray, too, bringing “small-talk by handfuls of glittering dust swept out of saloons,” says Mrs. Browning, though she does not mention that during these months he was also reading the manuscript of the matchless “*Rose and the Ring*” by a child’s sick-bed, the memory of which he recorded so tenderly in the preface to the book when it was published.

These are names enough to form a picture of the happy society in which the winter was passed. There was for the time no background of political excitement, and Mrs. Browning writes almost entirely of her friends and of the various sociabilities in which she takes part. In one remarkable letter, however, she writes at some length on the subject which still continued to haunt her mind. The solemn faith and conviction of the passage which I shall quote is deeply touching. In the presence of this grave strain of emotion it is impossible to speak lightly of it; a

dispassionate onlooker must feel a certain shame at watching a noble mind so profoundly stirred by what affects him so little. After describing certain fresh phenomena of spiritualism, she continues—

“ Well, you would have us snowed upon with poppies till we sleep and forget these things. I, on the contrary, would have our eyes wide open, our senses ‘all attentive,’ our souls lifted in reverential expectation. Every *fact* is a word of God, and I call it irreligious to say, ‘I will deny this because it displeases me.’ ‘I will look away from that because it will do me harm.’ Why be afraid of the *truth*? God is in the truth, and He is called also Love. The evil results of certain experiences of this class result mainly from the superstitious and distorted views held by most people concerning the spiritual world. We have to learn—we in the body—that Death does not teach all things. Death is simply an accident. Foolish Jack Smith who died on Monday, is on Tuesday still foolish Jack Smith. If people who on Monday scorned his opinions prudently, will on Tuesday receive his least words as oracles, they very naturally may go mad, or at least do something as foolish as their inspirer is. Also, it is no argument against any subject, that it drives people mad who suffer themselves to be absorbed in it. That would be an argument against all religion, and all love, by your leave. Ask the Commissioners of Lunacy; knock at the door of mad-houses in general, and inquire what two causes act almost universally in filling them. Answer—love and religion. The common objection of the degradation of knocking with the leg of the table, and the ridicule of the position for a spirit,

etc., etc., I don't enter into at all. Twice I have been present at table-experiments, and each time I was deeply impressed—impressed, there's the word for it ! The panting and shivering of that dead dumb wood, the human emotion conveyed through it—by what? had to me a greater significance than the St. Peter's of this Rome. O poet ! do you not know that poetry is not confined to the clipped alleys, no, nor to the blue tops of 'Parnassus hill'? Poetry is where we live and have our being—wherever God works and man understands. Hein! . . . if you are in a dungeon and a friend knocks through the outer wall, spelling out by knocks the words you comprehend ; you don't think the worse of the friend standing in the sun who remembers you. He is not degraded by it, you rather think. Now apply this."

With the return of spring they prepared to leave Rome for Florence, intending shortly to proceed to England ; that part of the plan was, however, abandoned for the present. Mrs. Browning writes on May 10, 1854, to Miss Mitford—

" To leave Rome will fill me with barbarian complacency. I don't pretend to have a rag of sentiment about Rome. It's a palimpsest Rome—a watering-place written over the antique—and I haven't taken to it as a poet should, I suppose ; only let us speak the truth, above all things. I am strongly a creature of association, and the associations of the place have not been personally favourable to me. Among the rest, my child, the light of my eyes, has been more unwell lately than I ever saw him in his life, and we

were forced three times to call in a physician. The malady was not serious, it was just the result of the climate, relaxation of the stomach, etc., but the end is that he is looking a delicate, pale, little creature, he who was radiant with all the roses and stars of infancy but two months ago. The pleasantest days in Rome we have spent with the Kembles—the two sisters—who are charming and excellent, both of them, in different ways ; and certainly they have given us some exquisite hours on the Campagna, upon picnic excursions, they and certain of their friends—for instance, M. Ampère, the member of the French Institute, who is witty and agreeable ; M. Gorze, the Austrian Minister, also an agreeable man ; and Mr. Lyons, the son of Sir Edmund, etc. The talk was almost too brilliant for the sentiment of the scenery, but it harmonized entirely with the mayonnaise and champagne. I should mention, too, Miss Hosmer (but she is better than a talker), the young American sculptress, who is a great pet of mine and of Robert's, and who emancipates the eccentric life of a perfectly 'emancipated female' from all shadow of blame by the purity of hers. She lives here all alone (at twenty-two) ; dines and breakfasts at the *cafés* precisely as a young man would ; works from six o'clock in the morning till night, as a great artist must, and this with an absence of pretension and simplicity of manners which accord rather with the childish dimples in her rosy cheeks than with her broad forehead and high aims."

By the end of May, 1854, they were back at Casa Guidi, carrying with them a portrait of Browning, in which Page had surpassed himself in Venetian splendour, by the aid of

those unfortunate “secrets” which were to produce on the spot the mellowness of extreme age. This portrait is said to have acquired such additional mellowness in fifty years as to have practically disappeared by now.

On June 6 Mrs. Browning writes—

“I love Florence, the place looks exquisitely beautiful in its garden-ground of vineyards and olive-trees, sung round by the nightingales day and night, nay, sung *into* by the nightingales, for as you walk along the streets in the evening the song trickles down into them till you stop to listen. Such nights we have between starlight and firefly-light, and the nightingales singing! I would willingly stay here, if it were not that we are constrained by duty and love to go and, at some day not distant, I dare say we shall come back ‘for good and all,’ as people say, seeing that, if you take one thing with another, there is no place in the world like Florence, I am persuaded, for a place to live in. Cheap, tranquil, cheerful, beautiful, within the limit of civilization yet out of the crush of it.”

So far from going to England this summer, they did not even leave Florence. She writes on July 20 to Miss Mitford—

“Our reason for not going to England has not been from caprice, but a cross in money matters. A ship was to have brought us in something, and brought us in nothing instead, with a discount; the consequence of which is that we are transfixated at Florence, and unable even to ‘fly to the mountains’ as a refuge from the summer heat. It has been a great disappointment to us all, and to our respective

families, my poor darling Arabel especially ; but we can only be patient, and I take comfort in the obvious fact that my Penini is quite well and almost as rosy as ever in spite of the excessive Florence heat. One of the worst thoughts I have is about *you*. I had longed so to see you this summer, and had calculated with such certainty upon doing so. I would have gone to England for that single reason if I could, but I can't ; we can't stir, really. That we should be able to sit quietly still at Florence and eat our bread and maccaroni is the utmost of our possibilities this summer."

The summer and autumn passed very quietly. Lytton and F. Tennyson were at hand as before ; Mrs. Browning read Swedenborg, and continued to work at "*Aurora Leigh*;" Browning was completing "*Men and Women*"—"setting my poetical house in order," he wrote to Story, to make up for wasted time in Rome. In November Mrs. Browning writes—

"The heat at Florence was very bearable, and our child grew into his roses lost at Rome, and we have lived a very tranquil and happy six months on our own sofas and chairs, among our own nightingales and fireflies. There's an inclination in me to turn round with my Penini and say, 'I'm an Italian.' Certainly both light and love seem stronger with me at Florence than elsewhere."

The Crimean War had thrown its shadow over these months, it is true ; but though Mrs. Browning shrank with all her gentleness from the tale of horror, she could not but rejoice at the alliance of England with her hero, Napoleon III.

"The war!" she writes. "The alliance is the consolation; the necessity is the justification. For the rest one shuts one's eyes and ears—the rest is too horrible."

And again—

"Oh, the Crimea! How dismal, how full of despair and horror! The results will, however, be good if we are induced to come down from the English pedestal in Europe of incessant self-glorification, and learn that our close, stifling, corrupt system gives no air nor scope for healthy and effective organization anywhere. We are oligarchic in all things, from our parliament to our army. Individual interests are admitted as obstacles to the general prosperity. This plague runs through all things with us."

There is, however, when she writes of the war, just a touch of a certain hardness—not by any means the hardness of indifference, but the perceptible lack of recoil from present sufferings which is, perhaps, generally to be found in people of very lofty ideals of freedom and honour. Such sentiments, when very strongly held, always tend to become slightly abstract, and to lose sight of the individual in the vision of universal righteousness; and when Mrs. Browning writes: "For the rest, if we cannot fight righteous and necessary battles, we must leave our place as a nation, and be satisfied with making pins"—when she uses these words with the actual facts even of righteous battles before her, I think it must be felt that her sympathy with universal humanity is stronger than her feeling for men. She was not of those to whom no ideals seem worth the present fact of indiscriminate waste of life. She had the true enthusiast's gaze, beyond and above the moment,

to the goal for which no immediate sacrifice seems too great.

But the early days of 1855 brought a more personal sorrow. Miss Mitford, after some months of suffering, died on January 10. I will give out of its place a letter to Ruskin of the following winter, in which Mrs. Browning speaks finely of her character and genius—

“I agree quite with you that she was stronger and wider in her conversation and letters than in her books. Oh, I have said so a hundred times. The heat of human sympathy seemed to bring out her powerful vitality, rustling all over with laces and flowers. She seemed to think and speak stronger holding a hand—not that she required help or borrowed a word, but that the human magnetism acted on her nature, as it does upon men born to speak. Perhaps if she had been a man with a man’s opportunities, she would have spoken rather than written a reputation. Who can say? She hated the act of composition. Did you hear that from her ever?

“Her letters were always admirable, but I do most deeply regret that what made one of their greatest charms unfits them for the public—I mean their personal details. Mr. Harness sends to me for letters, and when I bring them up, and with the greatest pain force myself to examine them (all those letters she wrote to me in her warm goodness and affectionateness), I find with wonder and sorrow how only a half-page here and there *could* be submitted to general readers—*could*, with any decency, much less delicacy.

“But no, her ‘judgment’ was not ‘unerring.’ She was too intensely sympathetical not to err often, and in fact

it was singular (or seemed so) what faces struck her as most beautiful, and what books as most excellent. If she loved a person, it was enough. She made mistakes one couldn't help smiling at, till one grew serious to adore her for it. And yet when she read a book, provided it wasn't written by a friend, edited by a friend, lent by a friend, or associated with a friend, her judgment could be fine and discriminating on most subjects, especially upon subjects connected with life and society and manners. Shall I confess? She never taught *me* anything but a very limited admiration of Miss Austen, whose people struck me as wanting souls, even more than is necessary for men and women of the world. The novels are perfect as far as they go—that's certain. Only they don't go far, I think. It may be my fault."

Before the spring came Mrs. Browning had also suffered from a renewed attack of illness. She writes in April—

"I was looking miserable in February, and really could scarcely tumble across the room, and now I am up on my perch again—nay, even out of my cage door. The weather is divine. One feels in one's self why the trees are green. I go out, walk out, have recovered flesh and fire—my very hair curls differently. '*Is I, I?*' I say with the metaphysicians. There's something vital about this Florence air, for, though much given to resurrection, I never made such a leap in my life before after illness. Robert and I need to run as well as leap. We have quantities of work to do, and small time to do it in. He is four hours a day engaged in dictating to a friend of ours who transcribes for him, and I am not even ready for transcription—have not transcribed a line of my six or seven thousand. We go

to England, or at least to Paris, next month, but it can't be early."

It was at this time that she began to correspond with Ruskin, whom, it will be remembered, she had met on their last visit to England. From a letter to him of June 2, 1855, I extract the following :—

" Let me consider how to answer your questions. My poetry—which you are so good to, and which you once thought ‘sickly,’ you say, and why not? (I have often written sickly poetry, I do not doubt—I have been sickly myself!)—has been called by much harder names, ‘affected’ for instance, a charge I have never deserved, for I do think, if I may say it of myself, that the desire of speaking or *sputtering* the real truth out broadly, may be a cause of a good deal of what is called in me careless and awkward expression. My friends took some trouble with me at one time; but though I am not self-willed naturally, as you will find when you know me, I hope, I never could adopt the counsel urged upon me to keep in sight always the stupidest person of my acquaintance in order to clear and judicious forms of composition. Will you set me down as arrogant, if I say that the longer I live in this writing and reading world, the more convinced I am that the mass of readers *never* receive a poet (you, who are a poet yourself, must surely observe that) without intermediation? The few understand, appreciate, and distribute to the multitude below. Therefore to say a thing faintly, because saying it strongly sounds odd or obscure or unattractive for some reason, to ‘careless readers,’ does appear to me bad policy as well as bad art. Is not art, like virtue, to be practised

for its own sake first? If we sacrifice our ideal to notions of immediate utility, would it not be better for us to write tracts at once?

"Of course any remark of yours is to be received and considered with all reverence. Only, be sure you please to say, 'Do it differently to satisfy *me*, John Ruskin,' and not to satisfy Mr., Mrs., and the Miss and Master Smith of the great majority. The great majority is the majority of the little, you know, who will come over to you if you don't think of them—and if they don't, you will bear it."

In the course of July they left Italy on an extended visit north, which lasted until October of the following year. They proceeded straight to London, where they settled themselves for three months at 13, Dorset Street. I give some interesting extracts from her letters of these weeks. Mrs. Martin, it must be premised, had written as before, begging her to go to Herefordshire. Mrs. Browning writes—

"I have waited days and days in the answering of your dear, kind, welcoming letter, and yet I have been very very grateful for it. Thank you. I need such things in England above other places.

"For the rest, we could not go to Herefordshire, even if I were rational, which I am not; I could as soon open a coffin as do it: there's the truth. The place is nothing to me, of course, only the string round a faggot burnt or scattered. But if I went there, the thought of *one face* which never ceases to be present with me (and which I parted from for ever in my poor blind unconsciousness with a pettish word) would rise up, put down all the rest,

and prevent my having one moment of ordinary calm intercourse with you, so don't ask me ; set it down to mania or obstinacy, but I never *could* go into that neighbourhood, except to die, which I think sometimes I should like. So you may have me some day when the physicians give me up, but then, you won't, you know, and it wouldn't, any way, be merry visiting.

" Foolish to write all this ! As if any human being could know thoroughly what *he* was to me. It must seem so extravagant, and perhaps affected, even to *you*, who are large-hearted and make allowances. After these years !

" And, after all, I might have just said the other truth, that we are at the end of our purse, and can't travel any more, not even to Taunton, where poor Henrietta, who is hindered from coming to me by a like pecuniary straitness, begs so hard that we should go. Also, we are bound to London by business engagements ; a book in the press (Robert's two volumes), and *proofs* coming in at all hours. We have been asked to two or three places at an hour's distance from London, and can't stir ; to Knebworth, for instance, where Sir Edward Lytton wants us to go. It would be amusing in some ways ; but we are tired. Also Robert's sister is staying with us.

" Also, we shall see you in Paris on the way to Pau next November, shall we not ? Write and tell me that we shall, and that you are not disgusted with me meanwhile.

" Do you know our news ? Alfred is just married at the Paris Embassy to Lizzie Barrett. . . . Of course, he makes the third exile from Wimpole Street, the course of true love running remarkably rough in our house. For the rest, there have been no *scenes*, I thank God, for dearest Arabel's

sake. He had written to my father nine or ten days before the ceremony, received no answer, and followed up the silence rather briskly by another letter to announce his marriage. . . . I am going to write to him at Marseilles.

“ You cannot imagine to yourself the unsatisfactory and disheartening turmoil in which we are at present. It’s the mad bull and the china shop, and, *nota bene*, we are the china shop. People want to see if Italy has cut off our noses, or what! A very kind anxiety certainly, but so horribly fatiguing that my heart sinks, and my brain goes round under the process. O my Florence! how much better you are ! ”

And again to Mrs. Jameson—

“ I write to you in the midst of so much fatigue and unsatisfactory turmoil, that I feel I shall scarcely be articulate in what I say. Still, it must be tried, for I can’t have you think that I have come to London to forget you, much less to be callous to the influence of this dear affectionate letter of yours. May God bless you ! How sorry I am that you should have vexation on the top of more serious hurts to depress you. Indeed, if it were not for the *other side of the tapestry*, it would seem not at all worth while for us to stand putting in more weary Gobelin stitches (till we turn into goblins) day after day, year after, in this sad world. For my part, I am ready at melancholy with anybody. The air, mentally or physically considered, is very heavy for me here, and I long for the quiet of my Florence, where somehow it always has gone best with my life. As to England, it affects me so, in body, soul, and circumstances, that if I could not get away soon, I should be provoked, I think, into

turning monster and *hating* the whole island, which shocks you so to hear, and that you will be provoked into not loving me, perhaps, and *that* would really be too hard, after all. . . .

“Has ‘Maud’ penetrated to you? The winding up is magnificent, full of power, and there are beautiful thrilling bits before you get so far. Still, there is an appearance of labour in the early part; the language is rather encrusted by skill than spontaneously blossoming, and the rhythm is not always happy. The poet seems to aim at more breadth and freedom, which he attains, but at the expense of his characteristic delicious music. People in general appear very unfavourably impressed by this poem, *very unjustly*, Robert and I think. On some points it is even an advance. The sale is great, *nearly five thousand copies already*.

“Let me see what London news I have to tell you. We spent an evening with Mr. Ruskin, who was gracious and generous, and strengthened all my good impressions. Robert took our friend young Leighton to see him afterwards, and was as kindly received. We met Carlyle at Mr. Forster’s, and found him in great force, particularly in the damning clauses. Mr. Kinglake we saw twice at the Procters’, and once here. . . . The Procters are very well. How I like Adelaide’s face! that’s a face worth a drove of beauties! Dear Mrs. Sartoris has just left London, I grieve to say; and so has Mrs. Kemble, who (let me say it quick in a parenthesis) is looking quite magnificent just now, with those gorgeous eyes of hers.”

And to Mrs. Martin—

“One of the pleasantest things which has happened to

us here is the coming down on us of the Laureate, who, being in London for three or four days from the Isle of Wight, spent two of them with us, dined with us, smoked with us, opened his heart to us (and the second bottle of port), and ended by reading ‘Maud’ through from end to end, and going away at half-past two in the morning. If I had had a heart to spare, certainly he would have won mine. He is captivating with his frankness, confidingness, and unexampled *naïveté*! Think of his stopping in ‘Maud’ every now and then—‘There’s a wonderful touch! That’s very tender. How beautiful that is!’ Yes, and it *was* wonderful, tender, beautiful, and he read exquisitely in a voice like an organ, rather music than speech.”

It is interesting to note that Rossetti was also present on this memorable evening, and that while Tennyson was reading, he drew a portrait of him in pen-and-ink, which has since become well known.

A certain note of depression makes itself felt in these letters. It was not a very happy time in London for Mrs. Browning, owing chiefly to the fresh trouble in Wimpole Street, and the exile of her brother Alfred for the old unpardonable offence. But one pleasure she had, which does not appear in the letters, and that was the beautiful dedication, “One word more,” which Browning, speaking for once straight from the heart, with his own voice, suffixed to his new volumes, “Men and Women.” The liquid simplicity of these lines, the utter love and admiration which breathes in them, the entire absence of literary effort, make the poem one of the most deeply moving in our language; and to receive such a gift,

after nine wonderful years of new life, close to the very streets through which she had passed to join him in flight, must have atoned to Mrs. Browning for many sorrows and anxieties.

In October they moved to Paris for a second winter there. After a short stay in the Rue de Grenelle, they moved to more comfortable rooms at 3, Rue du Colisée, near the Champs-Elysées. From there Mrs. Browning writes in December to Mrs. Jameson—

“I have only good to tell you of myself. I am better through the better weather and through our arrival in this apartment, where, as Robert says, we are as pleased as if we had never lived in a house before. Well, I assure you the rooms are perfect in comfort and convenience ; not large, but *warm*, and of a number and arrangement which exclude all fault-finding. Clean, carpeted ; no glitter, nothing very pretty—not even the clocks—but with sofas and chairs suited to lollers such as one of us, and altogether what I mean whenever I say that an ‘apartment’ on the Continent is twenty times more really ‘comfortable’ than any of your small houses in England. Robert has a room to himself too. It’s perfect. I hop about from one side to the other, like a bird in a new cage. The feathers are draggled and rough, though. I am not strong, though the cough is quieter without the least doubt.

“And this time also I shall not die, perhaps. Indeed, I do think not.

“That darling Robert carried me into the carriage. swathed past possible breathing, over face and respirator n woollen shawls. No, he wouldn’t set me down even to

walk up the fiacre steps, but shoved me in upside down, in a struggling bundle—I struggled for breath—he accounting to the concierge for ‘his murdered man’ (rather woman) in a way which threw me into fits of laughter afterwards to remember. ‘*Elle se porte très bien ! elle se porte extrêmement bien. Ce n'est rien que les poumons.*’ Nothing but lungs ! No air in them, which was the worst ! Think how the concierge must have wondered ever since about ‘*cet original d'Anglais,*’ and the peculiar way of treating wives when they are in excellent health. ‘*Sacre.*’”

The months passed more quietly than their previous Parisian winter. Politics claimed less attention; and moreover, as the end of “*Aurora Leigh*” came in sight, Mrs. Browning began to work at it with consuming zeal, though a poem of her child’s, called “*Soldiers going and coming,*” interested her perhaps more. She writes in February, 1856—

“As for my poem (far below Penini’s), I work on steadily and have put in order and transcribed five books, containing in all above six thousand lines ready for the press. I have another book to put together and transcribe, and then must begin the composition part of one or two more books, I suppose. I must be ready for printing by the time we go to England, in June. . . .

“. . . I mean that when you have read my new book, you put away all my other poems or most of them, and know me only by the new. Oh, I am so anxious to make it good. I have put much of myself in it—I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects, there is not a personal line, of course. It’s a sort of poetic

art-novel. If it's a failure, there will be the comfort of having made a worthy effort, of having done it as well as I could."

They returned to London in June, 1856, occupying Mr. Kenyon's house in Devonshire Place. But their old friend was not there himself ; he was lying seriously ill in the Isle of Wight ; and this anxiety clouded what proved to be Mrs. Browning's last visit to England. Some busy weeks were spent in seeing "Aurora Leigh" through the press. But there was little pleasure in London, owing to the absence of Arabel Barrett, whom her father, on the rumoured approach of the Brownings, had despatched to summer quarters at Ventnor. There were thus two inducements to go to the Isle of Wight, and on September 9 Mrs. Browning writes from West Cowes to Mrs. Martin—

"We have been in the south of the island, at Ventnor, with Arabel, and are now in the north with Mr. Kenyon. We came off from London at a day's notice, the Wimpole Street people being sent away abruptly (in consequence, plainly, of our arrival becoming known), and Arabel bringing her praying eyes to bear on Robert, who agreed to go with her and stay for a fortnight. So we have had a happy sorrowful two weeks together, between meeting and parting ; and then came here, where our invalid friend called us. Poor Arabel is in low spirits—very—and *aggrieved* with being sent away from town ; but the fresh air and *repose* will do her good, in spite of herself, though she swears they won't (in the tone of saying they shan't). She is not by any means strong, and overworks herself in London with

schools and Refuges, and societies—does the work of a horse, and *isn't* a horse. Last winter she was quite unwell, as you heard. In spite of which, I did not think her looking ill when I saw her first ; and now she looks well, I think—quite as well as she ever does. But she wants a new moral atmosphere—a little society. She is thrown too entirely on her own resources, and her own resources are of somewhat a gloomy character. This is all wrong. It has been partly necessary and a little her fault, at one time. I would give my right hand to take her to Italy ; but if I gave right and left, it would not be found possible. My father has remained in London, and may not go to Ventnor for the next week or two, says a letter from Arabel this morning. . . . The very day he heard of our being in Devonshire Place he gave orders that his family should go away. I wrote afterwards, but my letter, as usual, remained unnoticed.

“It has naturally begun to dawn upon my child that I have done something very wicked to make my father what he is. Once he came up to me earnestly and said, ‘Mama, if you’ve been very, very naughty—if you’ve *broken china!*’ (his idea of the heinous in crime)—‘I advise you to go into the room and say, “*Papa, I’ll be dood.*”’ Almost I obeyed the inspiration—almost I felt inclined to go. But there were considerations—yes, good reasons—which kept me back, and must continue to do so. In fact, the position is perfectly hopeless—perfectly.

“We find our dear friend Mr. Kenyon better in some respects than we expected, but I fear in a very precarious state. Our stay is uncertain. We may go at a moment’s notice, or remain if he wishes it ; and, my proofs being sent

post by post, we are able to see to them together, without too much delay. Still, only one-half of the book is done, and the days come when I shall find no pleasure in them—nothing but coughing.

"George and my brothers were very kind to Robert at Ventnor, and he is quite touched by it. Also, little Pen made his way into the heart of 'mine uncles,' and was carried on their backs up and down hills, and taught the ways of 'English boys,' with so much success that he makes pretensions to 'pluck,' and has left a good reputation behind him."

Leaving Mr. Kenyon sinking gradually to his end, the Brownings returned in October, 1856, to Florence. "*Aurora Leigh*" appeared very shortly afterwards, and received on the whole a decidedly warm reception. Its somewhat artificial story and the uncertain characterization of the various figures, stood in its way to a certain extent, as, indeed, they still do. It is, moreover, bewildering to find that its plot was objected to in some quarters as decidedly indelicate. But the concentrated richness of the poetry—in which the story hangs like a stiff immature drawing in some splendid old carved frame, full of mellow gilding,—the exquisitely felicitous descriptions, the superb imagery, these were recognized at once as marking the crown of Mrs. Browning's work.

The book had been dedicated to John Kenyon, as a mark of gratitude for the inexhaustible sympathy and generosity which he had lavished for so long on both of them. But he hardly lived to see it. Before the end of the year the news of his death reached Florence; and before

long it was found that in the will in which he distributed his large property with characteristic munificence, the largest legacies were those to Browning and his wife. She writes on December 29, 1856—

“This Christmas has come to me like a cloud. I can scarcely fancy England without that bright face and sympathetic hand, that princely nature, in which you might put your trust more reasonably than in princes. These ten years back he has stood to me almost in my father’s place; and now the place is empty—doubly. Since the birth of my child (seven years since) he has allowed us—rather, insisted on our accepting (for my husband was loth)—a hundred a year, and without it we should have often been in hard straits. His last act was to leave us eleven thousand pounds; and I do not doubt but that, if he had not known our preference of a simple mode of life and a freedom from worldly responsibilities (born artists as we both are), the bequest would have been greater still. As it is, we shall be relieved from pecuniary pressure, and your affectionateness will be glad to hear this, but I shall have more comfort from the consideration of it presently than I can at this instant, when the loss, the empty chair, the silent voice, the apparently suspended sympathy, must still keep painfully uppermost.”

VIII

LAST YEARS

1857-1861

MRS. BROWNING had poured into her long labour on “Aurora Leigh” the best strength and beauty of her mind. Her power over language, so splendidly matured since her early days, her opulent imagination, continually budding with strange and lovely images, her delicate sensibility, her brilliant fire of passion, too profoundly sincere for any touch of vagueness or rhetoric, never luxuriating in emotion, but salted always with sharp savours of reality—all these she had spent in producing this great varied, living poem. I call it living, because, though the story does not impress itself on the mind nor the characters stand out clearly, yet, for page after page, it brims over with her own warm personality, like a lake whose quiet surface is dimpled with movement by the springs beneath. There never was a poem which, in one sense, was less dramatic—the sense, that is, in which “The Ring and the Book” is dramatic. “Aurora Leigh” is a monologue spoken straight from the mind and heart of the writer. Even when speech is put into the mouths of other characters, it is translated entirely into the writer’s language,

and coloured through and through with the writer's own emotion and thought. The result is that though the poem fails entirely to be dramatic in its treatment of the various points of view, of the different aims and purposes of the characters, it never ceases to ring and vibrate with the central life of the heart from which it all originates. This it is that gives it such vivid life. No one would read it for its story or for its character-drawing : Lady Waldemar is a conventional stage-figure, Marian Erle, though described so tenderly, is a literary type, Romney Leigh a mere shadow. But in Aurora a voice so full and real speaks out, and that with such intense and imaginative charm, that to read the poem is to be admitted straight into the presence of a living spirit, to be shown the recesses of a single mind, stored with rare fragrances and designs. The felicities and beauties of detail, if they were merely decorations laid on to the structure by a deft artistic hand, would not have that breathing charm with which they flower straight out of the personality behind them ; nor would they save a poem which, after all, does in fact fail to achieve its purpose. "*Aurora Leigh*" is not what Mrs. Browning meant it to be. It is not a marriage between impassioned poetry and the prosaic life of England in the nineteenth century ; or, at any rate, it is not a happy one. Still less is it a novel of men and manners told in the richer key of verse ; though here it must be admitted that there is a dramatic power in the management of the dialogue, if not of the characters, which is sometimes overlooked ; I would instance the two breathless moments in the last great scene between Aurora and Romney, the first that which follows on Aurora's unsuspecting assumption that Lady Waldemar is his wife, the second that in which the whole

of life seems suddenly to stand still as she discovers that Romney is blind. In spite of such moments as these, where the clash of passion raises the two figures in an instant to tragic heights, the poem is not the story of modern love and life which Mrs. Browning intended. It is a personal poem, written in a lyrical rather than a narrative key : owing its beauty to the fact that it reflects a single mind, not to its display of interacting motives and wills.

In Mrs. Browning's life, during the years in which she was engaged on this poem, there was, as I have pointed out, an unhappy exaggeration of emotion in certain directions, an impulse akin to hysteria, in which the flood-gates of her mind were opened, letting the waters spill frothily over instead of massing them securely in quiet depths. But of this there is no trace in "*Aurora Leigh*." While she wrote she still commanded the intellectual restraint and sanity of earlier years, at the same time that her ripened taste rejected all the old vices and redundancies which had once so marred her style. She gave her strength to the poem and not her weakness. Her genius lifting itself for a culminating effort, gathered all her powers into its grasp, and she worked at the poem in full command of voice and emotion.

The effort left her tired out, and when at the end of her labours there fell the blow of personal sorrow, its weight was twofold. The letters of these months are not many. They saw few people, and for the winter weeks she was as usual a prisoner by her fireside, enjoying her husband's pleasure in the warm reception of "*Aurora Leigh*," and delighting in the budding brightness and talent of her child. But the imperishable youthfulness that reigned in her found a vent, in the first mildness of

February, in the escapade described in the following letter to Miss Browning :—

“So gay a carnival never was in our experience—for until last year (when we were absent) all masks had been prohibited, and now everybody has eaten of the tree of good and evil till not an apple was left. Peni persecuted me to let him have a domino, with tears and embraces ; he ‘*almost never* in all his life had had a domino,’ and he would like it so. Not a black domino—no ; he hated black—but a blue domino, trimmed with pink ! that was his taste. The pink trimming I coaxed him out of ; but for the rest I let him have his way, darling child ; and certainly it answered, as far as the overflow of joy in his little heart went. Never was such delight. Morning and evening there he was in the streets, running Wilson out of breath, and lost sight of every ten minutes. ‘Now, Lily, I do *pray* you not to call out “Penini ! Penini !”’ Not to be known was his immense ambition. Oh, of course he thought of nothing else. As to lessons, there was an absolute absence of wits. All Florence being turned out into the streets in one gigantic pantomime, one couldn’t expect people to be wiser indoors than out. For my part, the universal madness reached me sitting by the fire (whence I had not stirred for three months) ; and you will open your eyes when I tell you that I went (in domino and masked) to the great opera ball. Yes, I did really. Robert, who had been invited two or three times to other people’s boxes, had proposed to return this kindness by taking a box himself at the opera this night and entertaining two or three friends with *gallantina* and

champagne. Just as he and I were lamenting the impossibility of my going, on that very morning the wind changed, the air grew soft and mild, and he maintained that I might and should go. There was no time to get a domino of my own (Robert himself had a beautiful one made, and I am having it metamorphosed into a black silk gown for myself!), so I sent out and hired one, buying the mask. And very much amused I was. I like to see these characteristic things. (I shall never rest, Sarianna, till I risk my reputation at the *Bal de l'Opéra* at Paris.) Do you think I was satisfied with staying in the box? No, indeed. Down I went, and Robert and I elbowed our way through the crowd to the remotest corner of the ball below. Somebody smote me on the shoulder and cried "Bella mascherina!" and I answered as imprudently as one feels under a mask. At two o'clock in the morning, however, I had to give up and come away (being overcome by the heavy air), and ingloriously left Robert and our friends to follow at half-past four. Think of the refinement and gentleness—yes, I must call it *superiority*—of this people, when no excess, no quarrelling, no rudeness nor coarseness can be observed in the course of such wild masked liberty. Not a touch of license anywhere. And perfect social equality! Ferdinando side by side in the same ballroom with the Grand Duke, and no class's delicacy offended against! For the Grand Duke went down into the ballroom for a short time. The boxes, however, were dear. We were on a third tier, yet paid £2 5s. English, besides entrance money."

No one can read the letters of Mrs. Browning without noticing a streak in her of a kind of merry, child-like

wilfulness, a sort of love in miniature of escaping for an innocent moment from rules and conventions, of which this little event is surely an instance. I do not mean that the entertainment in question involved any very grave breach of decorum, or that it was less than a highly castigated version of the *Bal de l'Opéra*. But the episode exemplifies the little fountain of liveliness that gushed deep down in Mrs. Browning's nature, and which wholesomely tempered the high lyrical enthusiasm of her character. It is the same spirit, already noticed, which contributed a zest to her enjoyment of Parisian *cafés*, and even of the liberal manners and impudent posters of the boulevards; and capable as she was of rounding on herself with amusement at what she felt to be a weakness, there is nothing whatever undignified or embarrassing about it for the observer. It is too slight a matter to dwell on; but it is worth noticing if only because it was this touch of elfish irresponsibility that lent a sparkle to her outlook. The humorous sense was not very strongly defined in her; but it was always latent, and she certainly developed under the influence of Browning a gift of happy and incisive description, though even to the end her taste is not always quite sure. The other, however, was her very own, and its touch was of the lightest. It is, moreover, amusing to reflect what would have been the feelings of her friends and family, and still more her own, if fifteen years before they and she could have been told that at the age of fifty she would mingle until two o'clock in the morning among the masked crowd of a Florentine carnival ball.

This, however, was an exceptional interlude in the quiet life of this winter. The next event was a visit in April from Mrs. Beecher Stowe, of whom she writes—

"I like her better than I thought I should—that is, I find more refinement in her voice and manner—no rampant Americanisms. Very simple and gentle, with a sweet voice ; undesirous of shining or *poser-ing*, so it seems to me. Never did lioness roar more softly (that is quite certain) ; and the temptations of a sudden enormous popularity should be estimated in doing her full justice."

To this time, too, belongs the curious draft of a letter to the Emperor Napoleon (never sent), which she wrote after being deeply stirred by the "Contemplations" of Victor Hugo, then recently published. In an impassioned appeal she begs the Emperor to recall the poet from his exile in Jersey, and to crown the record of his magnanimity by pardoning "this enemy, this accuser, this traducer." As Mlle. Merlette observes, Victor Hugo would decidedly have been the last person to be gratified by the intercession, if the letter had been sent. She makes no attempt to justify him ; she fully admits his guilt in attacking the great and glorious Napoleon III. ; she simply casts him upon her hero's mercy. The rhetoric of the letter is studied, but curiously eloquent and impressive. I quote a few sentences—

"Ah, sire, what was written on 'Napoleon le Petit' does not touch your Majesty ; but what touches you is, that no historian of the age should have to write hereafter, 'While Napoleon III. reigned, Victor Hugo lived in exile.' What touches you is, that when your people count gratefully the men of commerce, arms, and science secured by you to France, no voice shall murmur, 'But where is our poet ?' What touches you is, that, however statesmen and politicians may justify his exclusion, it may draw no sigh from

men of sentiment and impulse, yes, and from women like myself. What touches you is, that when your own beloved young prince shall come to read these poems (and when you wish him a princely nature, you wish, sire, that such things should move him), he may exult to recall that his imperial father was great enough to overcome this great poet with magnanimity."

Soon after this the news came that Mrs. Browning's father had died very suddenly on April 17. This was a shock in which there could be no softening of the edge of sorrow. Not long before, Mrs. Browning's good friend, Mrs. Martin, had renewed her attempts at intercession. But his daughters had "disgraced his family," Mr. Barrett said ; and though he professed to forgive them the shameful wrong they had done him, he still refused to see them. Browning writes on May 3, 1857—

"MY DEAR MRS. MARTIN,—

"Truest thanks for your letter. We had the intelligence from George last Thursday week, having been only prepared for the illness by a note received from Arabel the day before. Ba was sadly affected at first ; miserable to see and hear. After a few days tears came to her relief. She is now very weak and prostrated, but improving in strength of body and mind : I have no fear for the result. I suppose you know, at least, the very little that we know ; and how unaware poor Mr. Barrett was of his imminent death : 'he bade them,' says Arabel, 'make him comfortable for the night, but a moment before the last.' And he had dismissed her and her aunt about an

hour before, with a cheerful or careless word about 'wishing them good night.' So it is all over now, all hope of better things, or a kind answer to entreaties such as I have seen Ba write in the bitterness of her heart. There must have been something in the organization, or education, at least, that would account for and extenuate all this ; but it has caused grief enough, I know ; and now here is a new grief not likely to subside very soon. Not that Ba is other than reasonable and just to herself in the matter : she does not reproach herself at all ; it is all mere grief, as I say, that this should have been *so* ; and I sympathize with her there."

For several weeks after this Mrs. Browning had no heart to write to her friends. It is not till July 1 that she writes to Mrs. Martin—

" Thank you, thank you from my heart, my dearest friend—this poor heart, which has been so torn and mangled,—for your dear, tender sympathy, whether expressed in silence or in words. Of the past I cannot speak. You understand, yes, you understand. And when I say that you understand (and feel that you do), it is an expression of belief in the largeness of your power of understanding, seeing that few *can* understand—few can. There has been great bitterness—great bitterness, which is natural ; and some recoil against myself, more, perhaps, than is quite rational. Now I am much better, calm, and not despondingly calm (as, off and on, I have been), able to read and talk, and keep from vexing my poor husband, who has been a good deal tried in all these things. Through these three months you and what you told me touched me with a

thought of comfort—came the nearest to me of all. May God bless you and return it to you a hundredfold, dear dear friend !

“ I believe *hope* had died in me long ago of reconciliation in this world. Strange, that what I called ‘ unkindness ’ for so many years, in departing should have left to me such a sudden desolation ! And yet, it is not strange, perhaps.

“ No, I cannot write any more. You will understand. . . .”

There is no need for more words upon this difficult grief. Enough has been said of her father’s strange temperament to show that he can hardly be held responsible for the line of action which he had chosen and consistently followed. But that could not lessen the bitterness of the question, why such things should be at all.

We have already had instances of Mrs. Browning’s abnormal sensitiveness in the case of allusions to herself and her life. People might say what they liked about her poetry ; that was outside her, a matter for open praise or blame. But if a touch as light as a bird’s down fell on her inner feelings, she was liable to be almost prostrated by the shock. While she was still under the burden of grief caused by her father’s death, her friend, Miss Haworth, sent her news, in all kindness, of certain references which had been made to her at a spiritualistic *séance*. Mrs. Browning’s answer so deeply illustrates this side of her nature that I quote part of it—

“ I write soon, you see, dearest Fanny. I thank you for all, but I do beseech you, *dear*, not to say a word more

to me of what is said of me. The truth is, I am made of paper, and it tears me. Do not, dear. Make no reference to things personal to myself. As far as I could read and understand, it was absurd, perfectly *ungenuine*. I shall say nothing to anybody. I have torn that sheet. Do not refer to the subject to Isa Blagden. And there—I have done.

“No—I thank you; and I know it was your kindness entirely. Will you, if you love me, *not* touch on the subject (I mean on the personal thing to myself) in your next letters, not even by saying that you were sorry you did once touch on them. I know how foolish and morbid I must seem to you. So I am made, and I can’t help my idiosyncrasies.

“Now don’t mistake me. Tell me all about the spirits, only not about what they say of *me*. I am very interested. The drawback is, that without any sort of doubt they *personate falsely*.”

The *villeggiatura* was for the third time passed at the Bagni di Lucca, Robert Lytton and Miss Isa Blagden accompanying them. But it proved a time of distressing anxiety, and did not restore Mrs. Browning’s strength and peace after the sorrows of the past year. Lytton fell dangerously ill of gastric fever as soon as they arrived, and while he was recovering, Penini was also struck down by it, though less severely. Mrs. Browning was worn out in body and soul, as she says, and as soon as the child could be moved they hastened back to Florence. They had had thoughts of an extended flight for the winter to Egypt and Palestine, a plan that had attracted them for some years. But it was now obvious that Mrs. Browning was

quite unequal to such an exertion, and they gave up all idea of leaving Casa Guidi for the present.

The winter of 1857-8 was an exceptionally severe one, and though Mrs. Browning escaped illness, so that there was no definite cause for uneasiness in her condition, yet it seems that her strength was insensibly declining.

"The weight of the whole year," she writes in March, 1858, "added to a trying winter, seems to have stamped out of me the vital fluid, and I am physically low, to a degree which makes me glad of renewed opportunities of getting the air; and I mean to do little but drive out for some time. It does not answer to be mastered so. For months I have done nothing but dream and read French and German romances; and the result (of learning a good deal of German) isn't the most useful thing in the world one can attain to. Then, of course, I teach Peni for an hour or so. He reads German, French, and, of course, Italian, and plays on the piano remarkably well, for which Robert deserves the chief credit. A very gentle, sweet child he is; sweet to look at and listen to; affectionate and good to live with, a real 'treasure' so far."

Except for such labours of love, the winter passed uneventfully enough. There are still certain echoes, in the few letters of these months, of her two other engrossing preoccupations—spiritualism and politics. As for the latter, Italy was still in the trough of the wave, between the events of 1848 and 1859, and the immediate excitement was Orsini's attempted assassination, in Paris, of the Emperor Napoleon. That outrage calls from Mrs. Browning a passionate outburst against Mazzini, "that man of

unscrupulous theory," as she calls him, and the whole group of refugees and doctrinaire agitators whom he represented. It is worth noting that, with all her feverish zeal for the great cause, Mrs. Browning was never betrayed into sympathy with the dark methods of conspiracy and assassination by which some proposed to undermine the castle of tyranny rather than assault it in open fight. Even the pure ardour of such undaunted hearts as Mazzini's failed to move her if she felt it was not grounded upon common principles of honour. No doubt her detestation of such devices was heightened by the fact that they were directed against the heroic head of Napoleon. None the less it was always to the secure sagacity of men like Cavour that she looked for salvation, not to the theorists and visionaries, of whom she writes, "For nights I have been disturbed in my sleep with the thoughts of them."

In the domain of spiritualism, it may be noted that the much-discussed "medium," Hume or Home, was in Italy at this time, though he did not come near Casa Guidi. The name of this man, by all accounts a singularly repellent specimen of his class, has been unhappily dragged between that of Browning and his wife. In the summer of 1855 he had figured at a *séance* near London at which they had been present; and it is said that while Mrs. Browning was profoundly impressed by the wonders which she saw and heard, Browning himself would in after-years turn white with passion at the very mention of the medium's name. Whether or no Browning actually detected him in fraud, there is no doubt that the relentless portrait of "Mr. Sludge the medium" was to some extent drawn from this man;

and the whole incident has been duly handled by those who have sought in it a proof that it blurred for a moment the harmony between husband and wife. That is absurd, because if there is one thing certain it is that they preserved a rather remarkable degree of intellectual independence; it was the normal state of affairs between them that they should both have their own views. In so many devoted unions, where each reflects the opinions of the other, or where one of the two yields up the right of holding opinions at all, the sudden appearance of a difference of faith may throw a cloud, an embarrassment between the two. But the Brownings respected each other's independent rights. They discussed their beliefs openly, and there could be no possible question of discord over a divergence. All we have, therefore, to do is to note the divergence, and to see, too, how very easily it is to be explained. Browning, as has often been insisted, was a double personality: a poet, who loved to turn over the embedded stones of the mind and watch the swarm of quaint and often horrible creatures that crawled and writhed beneath them; and on the other side a very simple, hearty, normal man, straightforward in his feelings, and even not without a certain amount of that conventionality of mind, which so beneficently smooths the path of the human soul among conflicting ideas and faiths. It was as the ordinary man, not as the poet, that he loved his wife. In his poetry he could dissect the whole race of Sludges, not only with zest, but with a fine, large sympathy as well. But when he saw these spoilt, drawing-room prophets, with their obsequious manners and their insinuating airs of mystery, brought into the presence of his wife, the whole of his

healthy, masculine soul revolted at the sight. She, with a woman's more disembodied impulses, could disregard the nauseating surface vulgarities of Home and his like—could, indeed, freely admit that “mediums” were conspicuous for their lack of refinement—and fix her thoughts on the wonderful current that seemed to pass through them from the world of the dead. But her husband could only see a contaminating horror daring to lift its head in his wife's inviolate presence ; and it is monstrous to talk of what was really an instinctive delicacy, born of his love for his wife, as if it had been some kind of dislocation of their mutual confidence.

The two following letters, written in London in the summer of 1855, are here, by the courtesy of Mr. F. G. Kenyon and Mr. F. Merrifield, printed for the first time. They are purposely given out of chronological order, as illustrating in a very interesting manner the frank difference of opinion which I have here indicated. They are addressed to Miss de Gaudrion, afterwards Mrs. Merrifield, whose husband has kindly offered them for publication.

“ DEAR MADAM,

“ I hope you will pardon my delay in replying to your letter, and attribute it to the right cause ; my time being much occupied during our brief visit to London. You address me in a name which could not do otherwise than move me to an answer, even if the tone of your application had not made me willing to be open with you on your own account.

“ I went with my husband to witness the so-called spiritual manifestations at ——. I enclose to you in his

handwriting an account of the impression he received. Mine, I must frankly say, were entirely different. The class of phenomena in question appears to me too numerous not to be recognized as facts. I believe them to occur often under circumstances which exclude the possibility of imposture. That there *is* sometimes imposture is natural and necessary . . . for wherever there is a truth there will be a counterfeit of the truth. But if you ask me (as you do) whether I would rank the phenomena witnessed at — among the counterfeits, I sincerely answer that I may be much mistaken, of course, but for my own part and in my own conscience I find no reason for considering the medium in question *responsible* for anything seen or heard on the occasion.

“Having said so much, I am anxious to guard myself against misunderstanding. I consider that the idea of looking for theological teaching or any other sort of teaching to these supposed spirits, would be absolutely disastrous. Also that the seeking for intercourse with any particular spirit would be apt to end in either disappointment or delusion. In the present undeveloped state of the subject, with the tendency to ‘personation’ on the part of the (so-called) spirits, and the difficulties on ours as well as theirs, the manifestations are apt to be so low and our apprehensions so unsteady, that we could hope to see our faces as well in a shivered looking-glass, as catch a clear view of a desired truth or lost friend by these means. What we do see, is—a shadow on the window—the sign of something moving without—the proof of and beginning of access from a spiritual world—of which we shall presently learn more perhaps, and I, for one, believe we shall.”

“ You may be unaware that many persons who are called ‘ believers ’ in these things, believe simply in the physical facts, attribute them to physical causes, and dismiss the spiritual theory as neither necessary nor tenable.

“ This is not my view, however.

“ I enclose back to you the letter of my dear friend, knowing well the value of such a memorial. And with a most thankful sense for the sympathy which you have given to myself personally,

“ I remain,

“ Very faithfully yours,

“ ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.”

Enclosed with the foregoing—

“ Mr. Browning presents his compliments to Miss de Gaudrion, and feels it his duty to say a word for himself in reply to her note—though he has to overcome a real repugnance at recurring to the subject.

“ Mr. Browning did, in company with his wife, witness Mr. Hume’s performances at — on the night Miss de Gaudrion alludes to — and he is hardly able to account for the fact that there can be another opinion than his own on the matter—that being that the whole display of ‘hands,’ ‘spirit utterances,’ etc., were a cheat and imposture. Mr. Browning believes in the sincerity and good faith of the — family, and regrets proportionally that benevolent, worthy people should be subjected to the consequences of those admirable qualities of benevolence and worth when unaccompanied by a grain of worldly wisdom, or indeed Divine wisdom, either of which would dispose of all this

melancholy stuff in a minute. Mr. Browning has, however, abundant experience that the best and rarest of nature may begin by the proper mistrust of the more ordinary results of reasoning when employed in such investigations as these ; go on to an abnegation of the regular tests of truth and rationality in favour of those particular experiments—and end in a voluntary prostration of the whole intelligence before what is assumed to transcend all intelligence. Once arrived at this point, no trick is too gross ; absurdities are referred to ‘low spirits,’ falsehoods to ‘personating spirits’—and the One, terribly apparent spirit—the father of lies—has it all his own way. Mr. Browning had some difficulty in keeping from an offensive expression of his feelings at Mr. ——’s—he has since seen Mr. Hume and relieved himself.

“Mr. Browning recommends leaving the business to its natural termination, and will console himself for any pain to the dupes by supposing that their eventual profit in improved intelligence would be no otherwise procurable.”

During the summer of 1858 Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife were at Florence for a time. They paid several visits to Casa Guidi, and both of them wrote elaborate accounts of the house and its inmates. The famous description in the “Passages from the Note-books” does not show Hawthorne at his best. His sedate, sensitive eloquence, when applied to real people and not to the twilight visions of his romances, is apt to seem tiresomely mannered and artificial ; yet it is a beautiful sight that he gives of the great, quiet rooms, of Browning, genial and welcoming, and of his tiny fragile wife, who received them

with sweet graciousness, while her child flitted lightly to and fro among the party.

In the late summer they made a short visit to France, to see Browning's father and sister, who were now living in Paris.

"I liked it as I always like Paris," Mrs. Browning writes, "for which I have a decided fancy. And yet I did nothing, except in one shop, and in a fiacre driving round and round, and sometimes at a restaurant, dining round and round. But Paris is so full of life—murmurs so of the fountain of intellectual youth for ever and ever—that rolling up the Rue de Rivoli (much more the Boulevards) suggests a quicker beat of the fancy's heart; and I like it—I like it. The architectural beauty is wonderful. Give me Venice on water, Paris on land—each in its way is a dream city."

After a fortnight in Paris they went for some weeks, still with Browning's father and sister, to Havre, returning to Paris again for September. Arabel Barrett had already joined them, and they spent a short and peaceful month in an apartment near the Place Vendôme. It was the last time that the sisters were together. In October Browning and his wife made a leisurely journey back to Florence.

"We took nine days to get here from Paris," she writes from Casa Guidi, "spending only one day at Chambéry, for the sake of Les Charmettes and Rousseau. Robert played the 'Dream' on the old harpsichord, the keys of which rattled in a ghastly way, as if it were the bones of him who once so 'dreamed.'

"Oh, so glad I am to be back," she adds,—"so glad, so glad!"

But even the Florentine winter was plainly too much for Mrs. Browning now, and in the middle of November they moved on to Rome. A friend opportunely lent them his empty carriage, and they made the journey by easy stages, sleeping five nights on the road.

"Our journey was delightful and not without some incidents, which might have been accidents. We were as nearly as possible thrown once into a ditch and once down a mountain precipice, the spirited horses plunging on one side, but at last Mr. Eckley lent us his courier, who sate on the box by the coachman and helped him to manage better. Then there was a fight between our oxen-drivers, one of them attempting to stab the other with a knife, and Robert rushing in between till Peni and I were nearly frantic with fright. No harm happened, however, except that Robert had his trousers torn. And we escaped afterwards certain banditti, who stopped a carriage only the day before on the very road we travelled, and robbed it of sixty-two scudi."

In Rome they occupied their old rooms at 43, Via Bocca di Leone.

It was a happy winter, though Mrs. Browning was far less able than she had been before to take part in the good English and American sociabilities of Rome. But many old friends came to see her as she sat indoors, and some new ones—among them the Hawthornes; there was also a notable visit from Massimo d'Azeglio, the Piedmontese patriot and statesman—"a noble chivalrous head," writes

Mrs. Browning, "and that largeness of the political morale which I find nowhere among statesmen, except in the head of the French Government."

Browning himself was in great vigour and spirits.

"He is plunged into gaieties of all sorts," writes Mrs. Browning on January 17, 1859, "caught from one hand to another like a ball, has gone out every night for a fortnight together, and sometimes two or three times deep in a one night's engagements. So plenty of distraction, and no Men and Women. Men and women from without instead! I am shut up in the house of course, and go to bed when he goes out—and the worst is, that there's a difficulty in getting books. Still, I get what I can, and stop up the chinks with Swedenborg; and in health am very well, for me, and in tranquillity excellently well. Not that there are not people more than enough who come to see me, but that there is nothing vexatious just now; life goes smoothly, I thank God, and I like Rome better than I did last time."

It was now that with bewildering swiftness the rumour of war suddenly ran through Italy again after ten years of tranquillity. Early in the year Napoleon had made it plain that he was prepared to support Piedmont against Austria in a new attempt to win the north of Italy for the Italians. If France could be relied on, Victor Emmanuel, the Piedmontese king, was ready, and for the next few months hopes and excitements spun to and fro, steadily concentrating upon the idea of war. To Mrs. Browning, when she saw her hero stretching out his hand to lift her adored Italy into freedom, it seemed as if her last and best dream had come true.

"Just now," she writes in March, "I am scarcely of sane mind about Italy. It even puts down the spirit-subject. I pass through cold stages of anxiety, and white heats of rage. Robert accuses me of being 'glad' that the new *Times* correspondent has been suddenly seized with Roman fever. It is I who have the true fever—in my brain and heart. I am chiefly frightened lest Austria yield on unimportant points to secure the vital ones ; and Louis Napoleon, with Germany and England against him, is in a very hard position. God save us all ! "

On April 29, 1859, the Austrians crossed the Ticino into Piedmont, and war was declared. Very soon afterwards the Brownings returned to Florence, where a final revolution had already been carried through, the Austrian Grand Duke giving place to a provisional government. Napoleon's victories at Magenta and Solferino followed quickly in June, and it is not less than painful to see the torture of excitement with which Mrs. Browning was rent, as she watched and waited for news. It was not long in coming. Lombardy was free now, and the next step was to add Venetia to Lombardy. When Mrs. Browning learned that this step was not to be taken, and that Napoleon had put an end to his campaign by the Treaty of Villafranca, she fell under the stroke of a personal disappointment too bitter to endure. Not that her faith in Napoleon was shaken ; English and German intrigues seemed to her enough to explain his sudden abandonment of the great work while it was only half done. But she had set her heart so singly upon the idea of a free Italy, that the reaction threw her into a really severe illness.

"Walking on the mountains of the moon," she wrote

afterwards to Miss Blagden, “hand in hand with a dream more beautiful than them all, then falling suddenly on the hard earth on one’s head, no wonder that one should suffer. Oh, Isa, the tears are even now in my eyes when I think of it !”

As soon as it was possible for her to travel, they went for the *villeggiatura* to Siena. There they had the welcome society of the Storys, who were at a villa half a mile from the one which they occupied themselves. They had, moreover, the less reposeful company of Landor, now far on in his explosive old age.

“ Within a stone’s throw, in a villino, lives the poor old lion Landor, who, being sorely buffeted by his family at Fiesole, far beyond ‘kissing with tears’ (though Robert did what he could), took refuge with us at Casa Guidi one day, broken-hearted and in wrath. He stays here while we stay, and then goes with us to Florence, where Robert has received the authorization of his English friends to settle him in comfort in an apartment of his own, with my late maid, Wilson (who married our Italian man-servant), to take care of him ; and meanwhile the quiet of this place has so restored his health and peace of mind that he is able to write awful Latin alcaics, to say nothing of hexameters and pentameters, on the wickedness of Louis Napoleon.”

He had, indeed, recently been literally turned out-of-doors from his villa at Fiesole by his wife and children. Story, in his “Conversations in a Studio,” describes how he wandered down to Florence, broken and disconsolate, but with enough of the old heroic fire in him to breathe out wrath against

the family which had disowned him. As he drifted about the streets, with nothing but a few pence in his pockets, he fell in with Browning, who at once took charge of him, and tried to arrange a reconciliation, though in vain. At the last moment he elected to go to Siena with them, and in the peaceful life there his great extravagant mind recovered its force ; he sat with the Storys on their cypress-shaded lawn, talking with characteristic vehemence and incisiveness ; "Mrs. Browning was often convulsed with laughter (says Mrs. Story) at his scorching invective and his extraordinary quick ejaculations, perpetual God-bless-my-souls ! etc." So some three months passed at Siena ; Mrs. Browning was still extremely weak and troubled by incessant coughing ; but her condition ceased to give uneasiness, and her letters to her friends show all her old eagerness and vigour.

But her small reserve of health was disastrously affected by her agonized excitement over the affairs of Italy ; and the quality of her mind to some extent suffered in consequence. There seems to be a certain heartlessness in such a suggestion, because, of course, her interest was born entirely of her passionate love of the name of freedom. Moreover, there was nothing sentimental about this love ; she did not adopt Italy, she did not sacrifice her strength and happiness to her excitement, because it seemed a picturesque thing to do, or because it sat gracefully upon the character of an impassioned poetess, a high-priestess of liberty. Nor had she any wide acquaintance with Italians, or share in the social life of the country. It was simply that her lyrical hatred of despotism and love of democratic institutions were roused by the sight, close at hand, of a nation in whom the same desires were beginning to break out

into action. She found under her very eyes exactly the kind of drama with which she could most sympathize, and on it accordingly she lavished her deepest and purest emotion.

But what mars the beauty of it all is finally that it seems to involve a confusion in the sense of the importance of things, a blurring of perception, a lowering of the power to estimate values in a philosophic spirit. One would not feel that she lost intellectual dignity if it had merely been that she tried to clasp a shadow, a nameless ideal too remote and beautiful to be realized. But this is not the impression one receives from her prodigal enthusiasm. One feels rather that she thought her peerless goddess of freedom could be enticed down to earth by a formula, that the heart of man could be purified by being given a vote and relieved of a tax. A faith in such nostrums may perhaps be a necessary preliminary to the accomplishment of definite political reforms. But it is impossible to pretend that such a faith can be held with passion by a mind of the finest order, whether the mind is that of a philosopher or of an artist. It may be just and reasonable to step over a puddle in the road instead of walking into it; but a man is not likely to squander his profoundest convictions upon the necessity of avoiding puddles, whose spirit is ranging among the mountain-peaks of the horizon. Mrs. Browning, by admitting her enthusiasm for certain obvious and accessible forms of liberty to the undivided domination of her soul, sacrificed the dignity of her genius—sacrificed, indeed, its very essence, for genius must remain detached and judge things for what they are worth, and suffers with the power to keep aloof. This storming of the mind by inferior

forces is the more deplorable in the case of Mrs. Browning that she had once had the strength to withstand them ; once she had watched and guarded her fortress, instead of throwing all her gates open together. But somehow, obscurely, the freer, ampler life of her later years had had the effect of relaxing her hold upon her strength, and of deceiving her wise and beautiful spirit with voices and symbols.

Of the little pamphlet of "Poems before Congress," which was born of the excitement of these months, not much need be said. They are without literary value, and they have not even the merits of forcible controversial writing. But in her agony of excitement over the coming Congress, which was to establish the nucleus of a united Italy, she felt herself impelled to show the English public, as they sat at home applauding (so she pictured them) the intrigues which had frustrated Napoleon's generous designs, that one Englishwoman, at any rate, could be loyal to Italy and to the Emperor.

"But let me tell you," she writes to Mrs. Jameson, in February, 1860, "of my thin slice of a wicked book. Yes, I shall expect you to read it, and I send you an order for it to Chapman, therefore. Everybody will hate me for it, and so *you must* try hard to love me the more to make up for that. Say it's mad, and bad, and sad ; but add that somebody did it who meant it, thought it, felt it, throbbed it out with heart and brain, and that she holds it for truth in conscience and not in partisanship."

That is a fine and fitting *apologia* for this violent little

pamphlet, which had the reception she expected. Its chief interest now—and it is a pathetic interest, too—is the way in which it echoes Browning's style and versification. "Aurora Leigh" had already shown many traces of this influence, but in the "Poems before Congress" it is again and again Browning's very voice.

They left Siena in October, and returned for a few weeks to Casa Guidi. But the Roman winter was now a settled part of their yearly programme, and leaving Landor in Florence, established in an apartment of his own under the care of Wilson—though now an Italian matron, she was still known as Wilson in the Browning household—they moved to Rome early in December, finding a new apartment there at 28, Via del Tritone.

It was an uneventful winter. Mrs. Browning's strength was slowly sinking, but she escaped another attack of illness. She was busy seeing the "Poems before Congress" through the press, and saw few people.

"Rome is empty of foreigners this year," she writes to Mrs. Jameson, "a few Americans standing for all. Then, in the midst of the quiet, deeply does the passion work : on one side, with the people, on the other in the despair and rage of the Papal Government. The Pope can't go out to breakfast, to drink chocolate and talk about 'Divine things' to the 'Christian youth,' but he stumbles upon the term 'new ideas,' and, falling precipitately into a fury, neither evangelical nor angelical, calls Napoleon a *sicario* (cut-throat), and Vittorio Emanuele an *assassino*. The French head of police, who was present, whispered to acquaintances of ours, 'Comme il enrage le saint père!' In fact, all

dignity has been repeatedly forgotten in simple *rage*. Affairs of Italy generally are going on to the goal, and we look for the best and glorious results, perhaps *not without more fighting*. Certainly we can't leave Venetia in the mouth of Austria by a second Villafranca. We cannot and will not. And, sooner or later, the Emperor is prepared, I think, to carry us through."

This was almost the last letter which Mrs. Browning wrote to Mrs. Jameson. She died on March 17, 1860, and Mrs. Browning deeply felt the loss of the admirable friend who had helped her in her first flight to Italy, over thirteen years before.

Besides this grief, two vexing incidents troubled the early weeks of 1860. She was prepared for a storm of abuse from English critics for her Italian pamphlet, but she did not expect that one of the poems, "The Curse for a Nation," which was, in fact, a denunciation of American slavery, would be taken as directed against England. Indeed, it could only be so taken by one who read nothing of it except the title, and this was apparently what the *Athenæum* reviewer did.

"Robert was *furious* about the *Athenæum*," she writes ; "no other word describes him, and I thought that both I and Mr. Chorley would perish together, seeing that even the accusation (such a one !) made me infamous, it seemed.

"The curious thing is, that it was at Robert's suggestion that that particular poem was reprinted there (it never had appeared in England), though 'Barkis was willing ;' I had no manner of objection. I never have to justice.

"Mr. Chorley's review is objectionable to me because

unjust. A reviewer should read the book he gives judgment on, and he could not have read from beginning to end the particular poem in question, and have expounded its significance so. I wrote a letter on the subject to the *Athenaeum* to correct this mis-statement, which I cared for chiefly on Robert's account.

"In fact, *I* cursed neither England nor America. I leave such things to our Holy Father here; the poem only pointed out how the curse was involved in the action of slave-holding.

"I never saw Robert so enraged about a criticism. He is better now, let me add."

The other vexation was on a larger scale. In February, 1860, it was definitely announced that Nice and Savoy were to be handed over to France by Piedmont, as the price of Napoleon's intervention. This was a severe blow, not to Mrs. Browning's faith in the Emperor—for that presupposed a satisfactory explanation—but because it gave an inconvenient pretext to his belittlers. She writes in May, 1860, to John Forster—

"Oh, Savoy has given me pain; and I would rather for the world's sake that a great action had remained out of reach of the hypothetical whispers of depreciators. I would rather not hear Robert say, for instance: 'It was a great action; but he has taken eighteenpence for it, which is a pity.' I don't think this judgment fair—and much worse judgments are passed than that, which is very painful. But, after all, this thing may have been a necessary duty on L. N.'s part, and I can understand that it was so. For this loss of the Italians, *that* is not to be dwelt on; while for

the Savoyards, none knew better than Cavour (not even L. N.) the leaning of those populations towards France for years back ; it has been an inconvenient element of his government. Whether there are or are not natural frontiers, there are natural barriers, and the Alps hinder trade and make direct influence difficult ; and what the popular vote would be nobody here doubted. Be sure that nobody did in Switzerland."

Here is an outburst which illustrates her growing bitterness towards England—

"Ah ! dear Sarianna, I don't complain for myself of an unappreciating public—I have no reason. But, just for that reason, I complain more about Robert, only he does not hear me complain. To you I may say, that the blindness, deafness, and stupidity of the English public to Robert are amazing. Of course Milsand had 'heard his name !' Well, the contrary would have been strange. Robert is. All England can't prevent his existence, I suppose. But nobody there, except a small knot of pre-Raffaelite men, pretends to do him justice. Mr. Forster has done the best in the press. As a sort of lion, Robert has his range in society, and, for the rest, you should see Chapman's returns ; while in America he's a power, a writer, a poet. He is read—he lives in the hearts of the people. 'Browning readings' here in Boston ; 'Browning evenings' there. For the rest, the English hunt lions too, Sarianna, but their favourite lions are chosen among 'lords' chiefly, or 'railroad kings.' 'It's worth *eating much dirt*,' said an Englishman of high family and character here, 'to get to Lady ——'s soirée.' Americans will eat dirt to get to

us. There's the difference. English people will come and stare at *me* sometimes, but physicians, dentists, who serve me and refuse their fees, artists who give me pictures, friends who give up their carriages and make other practical sacrifices, are *not English*—no—though English Woolner was generous about a bust. Let *me* be just at least."

But by this time she was far too weak to take any pleasure in visitors. She writes to Miss Blagden in May, 1860—

"Dearest Isa, have I been long in writing indeed? You see, I let so many letters accumulate which I hadn't the heart to reply to, that, on taking up the account, I had over much to do in writing letters. Then I have been working a little at some Italian lyrics. Three more are gone lately to the *Independent*, and another is ready to go. All this, with helping Pen to prepare for the Abbé, has filled my hands, and they are soon tired, my Isa, nowadays. When the sun goes down, I am down. At eight I generally am in bed, or little after. And people will come in occasionally in the day, and annul me."

Early in June they returned to Florence. She writes with considerable spirit to Miss Haworth on June 16—

"We find Wilson well. Mr. Landor also. He had thrown a dinner out of the window only once, and a few things of the kind, but he lives in a chronic state of ingratitude to the whole world except Robert, who waits for his turn. I am glad to think that poor Mr. Landor is well; unsympathetical to me as he is in his *morale*. He has the most beautiful sea-foam of a beard you ever saw,

all in a curl and white bubblement of beauty. He informed us the other morning that he had ‘ quite given up thinking of a future state—he had *had* thoughts of it once, but that was very early in life.’ Mr. Kirkup (who is deafener than a post now) tries in vain to convert him to the spiritual doctrine. Landor laughs so loud in reply that Kirkup hears him.”

Another sorrow fell in the course of the summer, when the news came of the serious illness of her sister Henrietta (Mrs. Surtees Cook). Mrs. Browning’s first impulse was to hurry to England ; but it was clear that by this time she was quite unequal to such a journey. Even the move from Rome to Florence had exhausted her far more than usual ; she was forced to recognize that since her illness of the year before, her power of recuperation had not returned. They had to be again contented with a few weeks at Siena, where they took the villa they had occupied in 1859.

“The place we are passing the summer in is very calm ” (so she writes in August from Siena) “—a great lonely villa, in the midst of purple hills and vineyards, olive-trees and fig-trees like forest-trees ; a deep soothing silence. A mile off we have friends, and my dear friend Miss Blagden is in a villa half a mile off. This for the summer. Also, we brought with us from Florence and dropped in a villino not far, our friend Mr. Landor (Walter Savage), who is under Robert’s guardianship, having quarrelled with everybody in and out of England. I call him our adopted son. (You did not know I had a son of eighty-six and more.) Wilson lives with him, and Robert receives from his family in England means for his support. But really the office is

hard, and I tell Robert that he must be prepared for the consequences : an outbreak and a printed statement that he (Robert), instigated by his wicked wife, had attempted to poison him (Landor) slowly. Such an extraordinary union of great literary gifts and incapacity of will has seldom surprised the world. Of course he does not live with us, you know, either here or in Florence, but my husband manages every detail of his life, and both the responsibility and trouble are considerable. Still he is a great writer. We owe him some gratitude therefore."

The Storys also were close at hand as before, but the free sociable life of former years was much beyond Mrs. Browning now. "I like the quiet!" she writes, "the lying at length on a sofa, in an absolute silence, nobody speaking for hours together (Robert rides a great deal), not a chance of morning visitors, no voices under the windows." But her growing helplessness weighed upon her, not for her own sake.

"You see, Fanny" (she writes), "my 'destiny' has always been to be entirely useless to the people I should like to help (except to my little Pen sometimes in pushing him through his lessons, and even so the help seems doubtful, scholastically speaking, to Robert !) and to have only power at the end of my pen, and for the help of people I don't care for. At moments lately, thanks from a stranger for this or that have sounded ghastly to me who can't go to smooth a pillow for my own darling sister. Now, I *won't* talk of it any more. After all I try to be patient and wait quietly, and there ought to be hope and faith meantime."

In September they returned once more to Rome, establishing themselves at 126, Via Felice, and here before long they received the news of the death of Mrs. Surtees Cook. Soon afterwards Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Haworth—

“In one word, my dearest Fanny, I will thank you for what is said and not said, for sympathy true and tender each way. It is a great privilege to be able to talk and cry; but *I cannot*, you know. I have suffered very much, and feel tired and beaten. Now, it’s all being lived down; thrown behind or pushed before, as such things must be if we *are* to live: not forgetting, not feeling any tie slackened, loving unchangeably, and believing how mere a *line* this is to overstep between the living and the dead.”

And in the same letter, further on—

“Robert has taken to modelling under Mr. Story (at his studio) and is making extraordinary progress, turning to account his studies on anatomy. He has copied already two busts, the Young Augustus and the Psyche, and is engaged on another, enchanted with his new trade, working six hours a day. In the evening he generally goes out as a bachelor—free from responsibility of crinoline—while I go early to bed, too happy to have him a little amused. In Florence he never goes anywhere, you know; even here this winter he has had too much gloom about him by far. But he looks entirely well—as does Penini. I am weak and languid. I struggle hard to live on. I wish to live just as long as and no longer than to grow in the soul.”

So the wings of hope and strength are gradually furled,

as her hold upon life relaxes. Yet as sorrow and helplessness closed in upon her, her mind still rose to meet her old enthusiasms. She watched as closely as ever the great work that Cavour and Garibaldi were steadily carrying through ; and though her faith in spiritualism seems to have been deeply wounded by exposures of obvious fraud and charlatanism, the underlying significance, as to which she could not doubt, stirred her no less deeply than ever before. She writes on this subject in January, 1861—

“A lady was with me this very morning, who was converted from infidelity to Christianity solely by these means, and I am told that thousands declare the same. As far as I am concerned, I never heard or read a single communication which impressed me in the least : what does impress me is the probability of their being communications at all. I look at the movement. What *are* these intelligences, separated yet relating and communicating ? What is their state ? what their aspiration ? have we had part or shall we have part with them ? is this the corollary of man’s life on the earth ? or are they unconscious echoes of his embodied soul ?”

The plan for the summer was to visit Browning’s father and sister in France ; but by the time they had returned to Florence (early in June) it was clear that such an exertion was out of the question. Cavour’s death on June 6 affected her profoundly.

“We came home into a cloud here,” she writes on June 7. “I can scarcely command voice or hand to name *Cavour*. That great soul, which meditated and made Italy,

has gone to the Diviner country. If tears or blood could have saved him to us, he should have had mine."

A few days later she was attacked with bronchitis, though not so seriously as to cause especial alarm. They decided to go again to Siena for the summer, and were in treaty for their villa there. Her life had hung for so long by such a slender thread that there seemed no fresh reason for anxiety. But in the early morning of June 29 she died in her husband's arms.

A month later, Browning wrote to Miss Haworth—

"MY DEAR FRIEND,

"I well know you feel, as you say, for her once and for me now. Isa Blagden, perfect in all kindness to me, will have told you something, perhaps, and one day I shall see you and be able to tell you myself as much as I can. The main comfort is that she suffered very little pain, none beside that ordinarily attending the simple attacks of cold and cough she was subject to, had no presentiment of the result whatever, and was consequently spared the misery of knowing she was about to leave us: she was smilingly assuring me that she was 'better,' 'quite comfortable, if I would but come to bed,' to within a few minutes of the last. I think I foreboded evil at Rome, certainly from the beginning of the week's illness, but when I reasoned about it, there was no justifying fear. She said on the last evening, 'It is merely the old attack, not so severe a one as that of two years ago; there is no doubt I shall soon recover,' and we talked over plans for the summer and next year. I sent the servants away and her maid to bed, so little reason

for disquietude did there seem. Through the night she slept heavily and brokenly—that was the bad sign ; but then she would sit up, take her medicine, say unrepeatable things to me, and sleep again. At four o'clock there were symptoms that alarmed me ; I called the maid and sent for the doctor. She smiled as I proposed to bathe her feet, ‘Well, you *are* determined to make an exaggerated case of it !’ Then came what my heart will keep till I see her again and longer—the most perfect expression of her love to me within my whole knowledge of her. Always smilingly, happily, and with a face like a girl’s, and in a few minutes she died in my arms, her head on my cheek. These incidents so sustain me that I tell them to her beloved ones as their right : there was no lingering, nor acute pain, nor consciousness of separation, but God took her to Himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark uneasy bed into your arms and the light. Thank God ! Annunziata thought, by her earnest ways with me, happy and smiling as they were, that she must have been aware of our parting’s approach, but she was quite conscious, had words at command, and yet did not even speak of Peni, who was in the next room. The last word was, when I asked, ‘How do you feel ?’ ‘Beautiful.’ . . .”

She was buried in the English cemetery at Florence, and a marble sarcophagus, designed by Leighton, was placed over her grave. “E. B. B. ob. 1861,” is all that is written upon it.

So ends the story of this beautiful and flame-like genius, a soul with the matchless purity, the impetuosity, the purple-veined brightness of fire. And with the quenching

of that strong spirit, the sweet Italian home, the shrine of poetry set under glowing skies in the middle of such vivid and ardent life—this too was broken up. Robert Browning at once left Italy, and after a time of passionate, outspoken anguish, took his life up with firm hands, and set himself to build new work and new interests as far away and as different as possible from the old. He took his son back to England and devoted himself to his education ; he gave up Casa Guidi, with its flowery terrace and great dignified rooms, and settled in Bayswater, in a house characteristic of the place. He began a new London life of genial social intercourse, and in the middle of that his long-delayed fame reached him at last—fame unhappily then to some extent stultified by the indiscriminating adorers, the academic homage, that failed so grotesquely to understand his lively and warm-blooded personality. In this new world his ever-shaping brain accomplished a huge volume of work, much of it among his very best, through nearly thirty full and varied years. But the romance, the flower, the bloom of his life he left among the cypresses of Florence, jealously guarding its memory from all eyes.

To us who now try to revive that gracious memory, the picture remains as tender and as vivid as ever. Though the fame of Elizabeth Browning may not stand where it stood once ; though her fiery enthusiasms may have for us a certain unreality and extravagance ; though we may ask ourselves whether her ardent, masterful lover, when he broke her prison and hurried her forth to such new ventures, such liberated sympathies, did not after all bring her into a freedom in which her mind lost something of its finely tempered strength, whatever it may have gained

in richness and colour : yet, for us too the noble, burning soul is there, soaring to the sun, consuming the fragile body that held it to the earth : for us too her starry genius shines still, shorn no doubt of some of its rays, but set in its place among the greater constellations ; and best of all, for us too that union of poetry and of love, of two immortal hearts on whom the double gift had been lavished, that vision of romance and beauty, still glows with the colour of life. We too can feel the passion in the cry of the living poet to the dead—

“ O lyric love, half angel and half bird,
And all a wonder and a wild desire . . .”

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